This is the author's radio script of this article.
Islands of Gold by Grant Hyde (Macmillan, 2011)


Islands of Gold is Grant Hyde’s second swashbuckling nautical adventure, a sequel to Lords of the Pacific.

The year is 1796 and the Dutch East India Company is in its death throes. One of their ships, carrying a cargo of fabulous wealth in gold and treasure, has been wrecked in Torres Strait, and sadistic power games are being played with the lives of the hapless passengers by the venal merchant Hendricks. The troop of marines who would have been able to protect them has been tricked into giving up their weapons and are stranded on another island.

Meanwhile, an English brig with a crew of magnificent Tongans, and captained by the heroic Jonathan Lightfoot, is being pursued by a French frigate off the Great Barrier Reef. Lightfoot manages to lure the French ship onto the reef and claim it as a prize - he is ‘a superb sailor’, while ‘this Republican captain is no sailor’. The despicable French officers then abandon their ship, leaving their crew at the mercy of the English.

Fortunately, the English are merciful (as well as handsome and clever) and the French crew are treated well by Lightfoot. They mend the ship on the Queensland coast, meeting and befriending the local Aboriginal people, one of whom accompanies them when they set off for Java. On the way, they come across the wrecked Dutch ship and are able to rescue the survivors and dispense justice to the wicked Hendricks. And, of course, there’s the treasure. Fair’s fair. Even though it belongs to the Dutch East India Company and they will be ruined if they lose it, the English, the Tongan sailors and the Dutch marines decide that they have salvage rights, so they plan to divide it between them and set themselves up for life, some back in Tonga, others in that land of opportunity, New South Wales.

There are many dangers to be overcome before this can happen, and many men must die. The body count in this novel is extraordinary. Apart from the murderous Hendriks, who kills the defenceless for sport, there are massive crocodiles on the islands, and sharks in the water. But although these malign forces claim many lives, so do the heroes of this novel. The Tongans and the Aborigine, Burnum, are stealthy and skilled fighters, particularly good at disposing of sentries, and the Dutch marines have all sorts of clever tricks up their sleeves to make up for losing their weapons. And then there are the executions, in the cause of justice, or is it revenge - Hendriks and the French officers meet sticky ends when their time comes. The descriptions of these violent ends are usually gratuitously graphic. It’s hard not to suspect an almost pornographic intent in recounting the gory details, but the sickening effect tends to diminish as the horrors escalate and the bodies mount up.

The world of this novel is conveniently ordered so that the heroes - the Dutch marines, the English officers and the Tongan sailors - are brave, skilful and lucky, while the forces of evil are uniformly stupid and cowardly. Blatant essentialism abounds: the Aborigines’ corroboree is described as ‘a simple, proud people … at prayer.’ The female castaways who were repeatedly raped by the Dutch merchant and his henchmen are improbably quite safe once
they’ve been rescued by the English ship, despite the fact that the sailors haven’t seen a woman for some time.

These might seem irrelevant quibbles: this is, after all, just an adventure on the high seas, with no pretentions to literary pre-eminence. The plot is quite complicated with a lot of characters, and Hyde orchestrates them with reasonable skill. There is a certain fascination in the details of some of the tactics used to outwit an unsuspecting enemy. But for me - admittedly not the target audience for a book like this - the novel failed to engage my interest most of the time, because the excessive violence made me switch off, and because suspense was undermined by the fact that the outcome of every encounter was so predictable.