

# *Floating Gold*

by Margaret Muir

REVIEW BY ROSE FRANKCOMBE

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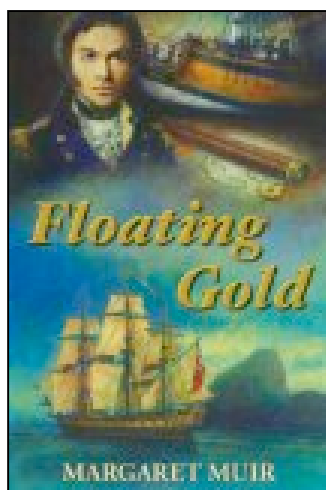
Captain Oliver Quintrell has something to prove. With twelve years British Naval service under his belt he is still young and fit. But it is something more than the obvious disfigurement of his right hand, where three of the digits have been blasted to eternity, courtesy of a four-pounder. More than the ignominy of his removal from his last commission and the months of rehabilitation he has endured, when for a time all his senses deserted him and everything he knew of himself and the sea was lost. More than the repulsion his wife, Victoria, feels at his intimate touch now his ugly claw is self-evident.

He has been dogged in his weekly approach to the Admiralty for consideration of another vessel. Nothing on God's earth is going to sway him from his true passion - the sea and the ships that sail upon it.

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*'Hundreds of billowing sails resembling patches of morning cloud were suddenly scudding around the rim of the world, while in the east, great golden spokes fanned across the sky like the helm of an ethereal ship which had risen from the seabed.'*

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Such are some of the words in *Floating Gold*, the latest offering from author Margaret Muir, published by Robert Hale, London, which takes the reader on a new voyage. Coming hard on the heels of her last novel, *The Condor's Feather* (2009), and previously *Sea Dust* (2005), *The Twisting Vine* (2006) and *The Black Thread* (2007), *Floating Gold* takes the reader on an arduous sea journey, in the sense of the nature of the times post the earlier Napoleonic battles and the subsequent Treaty of Amiens.

The author's pragmatic approach to the necessities of handling the sea-going rigs that require the numerous tars to manipulate the intricacies and complexities of working these vessels is clear.

The reader becomes absorbed and as one with the ship and the crew as the multi-layers below decks are revealed. Where the humble cook, cooper and carpenter play their individual parts in the smooth running of the vessel, so imperative to a good and safe voyage - to the men above who '*scampered up the ratlines and spilled along the yards*' to loose the canvasses ready for the wind - to the officers on deck aware of their status and responsibilities.

The reader gets a sense of the barbarism of the times, both in the homeland estuaries and in foreign waters, as anchored prison-hulks house the human flotsam awaiting transportation from the mother country to the far flung colonies around the globe - to the circling foreign vessels that bide their time in anticipation of another conflict, to those that sail flagless and anonymous in search of an opportunity of an unwary shipmaster and the spoils piracy will bring.

For those unaccustomed to the nautical terminology of the sailing ship, in this instance a 38-gun frigate, the *Elusive*, the author offers all the plausibility any writer could muster and presents every intricate detail in a very credible manner.

The chapters take us through the chronology of the story, beginning in the desultory summer of 1802 and leading us from Captain Quintrell's home on the Isle of Wight to the intriguing offer from the Admiralty, to the introduction of the various characters and places we will encounter during this voyage.

The characters aboard the *Elusive*, are enhanced by the naturalness of the dialogue, reflecting the idioms of the day - and the class structure that inhabits the ship. All aboard are only too well aware of the penalties of insubordination and a frisson of fear comes with any thoughts akin to treachery.

The reader early meets the First Lieutenant, Simon Parry, an officer who appears to have something to hide.

At Portsmouth Harbour more of the cobbled crew come aboard, including six young mid-shipmen, some not so fresh-faced as they were a year or two back.

Aboard, we can smell the aromatic oils exuding from the wood shavings that curl from the carpenter's plane as he crafts the timbers in his workshop in the bowels of the ship.

The sweet aroma of puddings on the boil escaping from the galley is tempered by the foul ammoniac latrine odours of human and animal excreta that come as a result of a company and live rations cramped aboard.

Taking no quarter, Captain Quintrell does not recoil from duty and ship's discipline, issuing the orders for the irons - or the 'cat' when required.

However, when south-bound the reader discovers the captain has a softness for a mistress who embraces him more warmly than his own wife.

But at sea, with the Admiralty caution ringing in Oliver's ears: '*We trust you will wear the name like a cloak and become a ghost ship on the sea*', he knows what he must do.

At the 15th parallel south, the secret orders are revealed and the scene is finally set - and the *Elusive* becomes a mere shadow in the mists as she peels westerly from the flotilla to which she has up til now been an escort. From this point, Captain Quintrell, can begin to find out what true mission is afoot.

There has always been intrigue but the tension really begins to pick up when sailing from Rio de Janeiro and mysterious events now begin to pepper the tale.

This company is sailing to a frigid place, where a strange and frightening phenomenon impedes the retrieval of an unimaginable treasure waiting just beyond. And it is at this time, too, that finally a perplexing question is answered, when a macabre discovery is made. It is something so vile and inexplicable it brings hardened sea-dogs to their knees.

The jacket illustration by Michael Thomas is enticing and lures the curious on to the must-read pages within. An historical seafaring adventure/mystery, it will be a special treat for those who have salt in their veins, or for those who enjoy a quest for an unusual treasure in a time when it was valued far beyond anyone's dreams.

***Floating Gold***

Written by Margaret Muir

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