

## Book Reviews for Friends of Millbank [www.friendsofmillbank.org](http://www.friendsofmillbank.org)

### *A Doctor's War by Aidan MacCarthy*

Grub Books, 2006; ISBN 10: 1904943403, ISBN 13: 9781904943402

With the Second World War looming large, a young Irish doctor by the name of Aidan MacCarthy flipped a coin with friends on a night out in London, and in doing so made the decision to sign up to the Royal Air Force instead of the Royal Navy. 'A Doctor's War', first published in 1979, is his first-hand account of the extraordinary series of events which followed.

The understated title gives little insight into a truly awe-inspiring account of one man's war, which takes the reader from the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940, to the aftermath of the second atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki in 1945, with years of harrowing captivity in Java and Japan in between.

There are a number of specific reasons I would recommend this book. Firstly, it is both easy to read and well-paced, which when combined with subject matter involving a procession of near-misses by land, sea, and air, makes for an engrossing story.

Secondly, the book details some of the most important moments in world history from the unique day-to-day perspective of an individual. What actually happened in the days prior to the evacuation from Dunkirk during the retreat across France? What were the streets of Nagasaki like in the aftermath of an atom bomb being dropped? Historical accounts such as this delve into detail that is sometimes missing from a broader analysis, and MacCarthy's story sheds fascinating light on these events.

Thirdly, the book is a valuable addition to the wealth of literature detailing the experience of the Far-Eastern prisoners of war. The majority of the book, and MacCarthy's war, takes place in Japanese captivity in Java and subsequently in mainland Japan. As a Medical Officer, MacCarthy had a unique insight into the brutality and suffering inflicted by the Japanese towards him and his patients. This hardship is matched only by the prisoner's resolve, ingenuity and humanity, and these qualities come to the fore during these chapters. From a medical perspective, MacCarthy describes the challenges of treating the infectious illnesses and deficiency diseases which ravaged the camp over these years; his determination to care for his patients despite lacking even the most basic of medical supplies provides an inspiring beacon of hope in their darkest hours.

Over the past few years there has been renewed interest and increasing recognition for the man behind the book, culminating in the Medical Centre at RAF Honnington being renamed in his honour by Prince Harry in 2017, some 22 years after his death. It was whilst stationed there prior to deploying to the Far East that MacCarthy was awarded the George Medal for rescuing the crew from a burning plane -another remarkable tale found amongst many in 'A Doctor's War'.

I would recommend this book for anyone seeking an inspiring tale of heroism, humanity, and survival against all the odds.

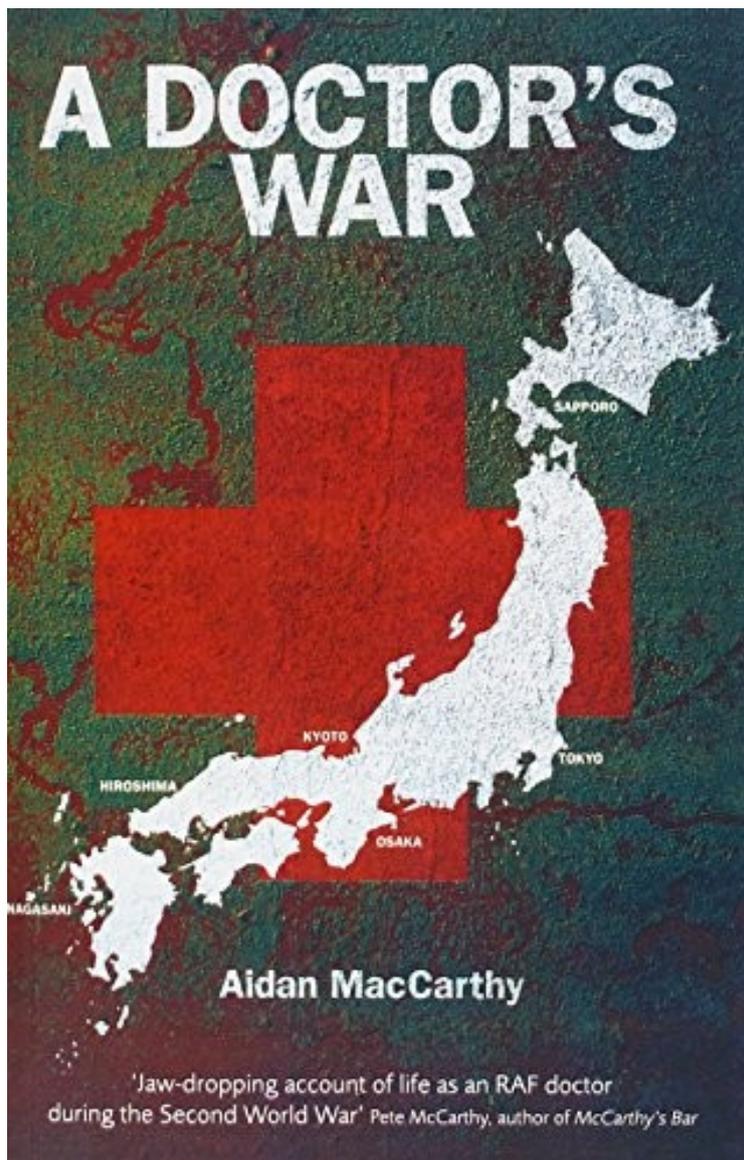
**Nathaniel Roocroft<sup>1</sup>**  
**April 2020**

Published online at [www.friendsofmillbank.org](http://www.friendsofmillbank.org)

---

<sup>1</sup> **Chairman's note:** Surg Lt Nathaniel Roocroft RN is also the author of a Personal Tribute to Bill Frankland

## Chairman's notes



*A Doctor's War, by Aidan MacCarthy (Book cover)<sup>2</sup>*

---

<sup>2</sup> **Chairman's notes:** Friends of Millbank may be interested in viewing an interview and vivid re-telling of this young doctor's war, including footage from Dunkirk and a graphic reconstruction of his experience of the atom bombing of Nagasaki, which can be downloaded as a MP4 file from Vimeo <https://vimeo.com/84950812>.

A brief account of the life of Air Commodore Joseph Aidan MacCarthy, OBE, GM (1914–1995) is available on Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aidan\\_MacCarthy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aidan_MacCarthy) He commanded several RAF hospitals after the war.

Aidan MacCarthy's war also features in a compelling biography, and story of reconciliation with the family of his Japanese captor, by Bob Jackson 'A Doctor's Sword' (2016); see <http://adoctorsword.com/about-the-doc/>

Aidan MacCarthy's extraordinary story was subsequently developed into a 70 minute full colour film 'A Doctor's Sword' to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the atomic bomb destruction of Nagasaki. It was screened for the first time on 7 August 2015, by the Irish Film Institute, <https://ifi.ie/film/a-doctors-sword>. It can be viewed at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4952148/>