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# ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY HONG KONG

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### THE SOCIETY

The China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society was founded in Hong Kong in 1847. Six parts of its Transactions were published from 1847 to 1859 after which the Society ceased activity. One hundred years later it was revived in Hong Kong as the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.

The object of the Society is to encourage an active interest in East Asia, and in Hong Kong in particular, through lectures and discussions, overseas visits, and by publishing an annual journal. Information about the Society including its history, activities and details of membership application is available on its website, [www.royalasiaticsociety.org.hk](http://www.royalasiaticsociety.org.hk), from the Administrator, GPO Box 3864, Hong Kong or by emailing to [membership@royalasiaticsociety.org.hk](mailto:membership@royalasiaticsociety.org.hk).

JOURNAL OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY HONG KONG 香港皇家亞洲學會學報

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*The Captain was a Doctor, The Long War and Uneasy Peace of POW John Reid* by Jonathon Reid

Toronto: Dundurn, 2020, 480 pages. ISBN 978-145-9747-21-0, US\$19.99

(Reviewed by Philip Cracknell)

Jonathon Reid has written a moving account of his father's life, and in particular his service during the Battle for Hong Kong, the callous incarceration that followed and the difficulties that many veterans experienced in returning to civilian life. His father, John ('Jack') Reid, had trained as a doctor. He volunteered to serve in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. After completing his training, he was selected to serve with 'C-Force', the Canadian infantry brigade sent to Hong Kong in November 1941. When he bade farewell to his wife, Jean, they had been married for just two years. He was 28 years old, a newly commissioned captain and a doctor. Three weeks after his arrival in Hong Kong the Pacific War began.

The author takes us authoritatively through the deliberations that led to the dispatch of Canadian troops to Hong Kong. The colony was considered an isolated outpost, a strategic liability that could neither be held nor relieved if attacked. If it came to war, it was to be sacrificed, but not without a fight. During the three-week battle, Captain Jack Reid was attached to the Winnipeg Grenadiers at Wan Chai Gap and Aberdeen. He was later assigned to the War Memorial Hospital on the Peak. The battle ended with the surrender on Christmas Day 1941. Of the nearly 2,000 men in C-Force, 290 had been killed in action and 493 had been wounded; a casualty rate of 40 percent.

As a medical doctor, Captain Reid's war continued after the battle. His war was now against disease and death in the prison camps in Hong Kong and Japan. The prisoners were on slow starvation rations; they were emaciated and weak and disease was rampant. Amongst the deadliest diseases were diphtheria and dysentery. Malnutrition-related diseases affected almost all the prisoners of war. There was little or no medicine allowed into the camps and there was no proper medical equipment. Young lives were pointlessly lost to disease and malnutrition. The author describes the appalling conditions in the makeshift hospitals where men lay on the concrete floor with overflowing toilets and the dysentery sufferers unable to control their motions. The author

describes how in conducting triage with a limited amount of serum, Reid, still a young man, had to decide who would live and who would die.

In January 1943, Reid took command of 664 Canadian prisoners of war being transhipped to Japan to work twelve-hour shifts as slave labourers in a shipyard. He was no longer just a medical doctor—he was now a commanding officer of a large number of Canadian soldiers in captivity. He was responsible for discipline, administration, liaising with the Japanese commandant, and for the lives and welfare of his men. He had to play a continual balancing act in his role as both commanding officer and medical officer. He saved many lives by the adeptness he brought to this dual role, especially with his interactions with the Japanese commandant. On arrival in Japan, the cold winter conditions, the inadequate rations, and the long hours of hard physical work led to outbreaks of influenza and pneumonia which claimed many lives.

The increased aerial bombing in 1944/45 heralded the Allied victory over Japan. The author describes masterfully the machinations in Tokyo during August 1945, after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Russian declaration of war. Following the Japanese capitulation, Reid returned to Canada in October 1945, aged 32, exactly four years from the time he had left Canada to serve in Hong Kong. He was promoted to Major and awarded the MBE. He resumed his life with Jean and their two sons were born, but the war had changed him. There were the nightmares and the cries in the night. He would try to avoid other veterans in order to escape what another veteran described as ‘uninvited memories’.

The author starts the book by saying ‘I hardly knew my father’. He and his brother knew their father was a war hero but he was not there as they grew up. Some years after returning from the war he had an affair with another woman. She became pregnant and he and Jean later divorced. He remarried and had four children with his second wife. The two brothers, growing up on the east coast of Canada, only saw their father, who lived on the west coast, once a year when he would take them on an annual lakeside holiday. Jean never married again and never spoke ill of Jack, knowing that the war had changed him. Like many, he had come home a different man. They were both victims and I think, in their own way, they still loved one another. He was a captain and a doctor and his job was saving lives and bringing as many of his men back home to Canada through the horror of Japanese internment. This he did and his men spoke highly of him. This is a very personal story of love

and war and sometimes the reader feels like an intruder, but the author tells the story dispassionately and honestly and without condemnation or blame.

The book is very well researched and very well written. It flows smoothly and takes the reader on an emotive journey through a man's life with a focus on the battle, the brutal incarceration and the grim realities of life and death behind barbed wire. This is a must-read book for both the general reader and for anybody interested in the Pacific War.

## NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

The Journal welcomes contributions relating to the history, languages, arts, literature, social conditions, and natural history of Hong Kong and the surrounding areas. They may be submitted as Articles (not exceeding 8,000 words including notes), or shorter items for inclusion as Notes.

Contributions should be submitted digitally as an MS Word document. Non-digital copy is not accepted. The text should be typed in double-spacing but otherwise unformatted. Notes should be placed as endnotes and numbered consecutively throughout. A style sheet for the *Journal* is available either as below or from the Society website <http://www.royalasiaticsociety.org.hk/journal/> and should be followed as closely as possible.

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All enquiries, submissions of material and requests for the Style Sheet may be sent to: The Administrator, G.P.O. Box 3864, Hong Kong, or [membership@royalasiaticsociety.org.hk](mailto:membership@royalasiaticsociety.org.hk) or The Editor, G.P.O. Box 3864, Hong Kong, or [editor@royalasiaticsociety.org.hk](mailto:editor@royalasiaticsociety.org.hk).

Where Chinese characters are required, the *Journal* uses the full Traditional form. Simplified Chinese characters are used only in special cases.

## PUBLICATIONS OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY HONG KONG

### THE JOURNAL

The Society has published a Journal since 1961. It was published as the *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* from 1961 until 2003. It then changed to the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* and is now, since 2018, the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong*, 香港皇家亞洲學會學報. The Journal is available online: Volumes 1–51 at <http://hkjo.lib.hku.hk/exhibits/show/hkjo/browseIssue?book=b27720780> and all volumes at <https://www.jstor.org/journal/jroyaaisasocihkb>. Members of the Society receive a copy of the Journal and a regular *Newsletter*.

### ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY HONG KONG STUDIES SERIES

In 2005 the Society produced the first volume in this series, the intention being to help make available important studies of the local history, culture and society of Hong Kong and the surrounding region. Generous support from the Sir Lindsay and Lady May Ride Memorial Fund makes it possible to publish this series of works of value both to scholars and to informed general readers. The early volumes were published with Hong Kong University Press, but since 2016 the Society and the Ride Fund have worked with a number of different publishers.

The Sir Lindsay and May Ride Memorial Fund was established in 2003 by the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong and is named after the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong 1949–64 and his wife, both founder members of the HKBRAS.

To date, the Hong Kong Studies Series includes more than 30 titles, most of which are hardback books but some of which are also available in softback. New titles appear from time to time. A list of titles that can be ordered from the Society is on the website at <http://www.royalasiaticsociety.org.hk/hong-kong-studies-series>. A complete list of these titles appears in the Society's *Newsletter*, published six times a year, available in e-copy from <http://www.royalasiaticsociety.org.hk/new-page/>. An order form and price list can be found in the *Newsletter*, or may be obtained directly from the Administrator: [membership@royalasiaticsociety.org.hk](mailto:membership@royalasiaticsociety.org.hk).

### OTHER ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY HONG KONG PUBLICATIONS

Since 1980, in addition to the *Journal* and the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Studies Series, either alone or jointly with other publishers, the Society has published occasional works written or edited by members. The total of six titles can be consulted on the Society's website at <http://www.royalasiaticsociety.org.hk/books/>.