

Abject Hero

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- **Sharon Stewart (Author) and Roderick Stewart (Author)**
Phoenix: The Life of Norman Bethune. McGill-Queen's University Press

Reviewed by [Alan Filewood](#)

Norman Bethune was not a literary man, although he was a spirited writer of doggerel when occasion demanded, and he was an obsessive writer of letters. As his life channelled towards the final months in China that have become his legacy, the ferocity of his letters increased, and he began banging out stories and poetry on his portable typewriter. Far removed from the manic excesses that had driven him through his rollercoaster life—chief among them alcohol and seduction—“Beth” began to be an author when the horrendous hardships of combat surgery in the Chinese mountains cleansed his life.

The theme of cleansing is one that recurs in this masterful biography. Bethune himself provided the title in his own invocation of the phoenix who is reborn “clean and pure & free” from the fire. As a shaping metaphor for a biography, the phoenix may be a bit of a cliché, but it is true that Bethune’s mission to China drew him out of the flames of disgrace and abjection that had resulted from his famous service with the Canadian Blood Transfusion unit that he had founded in the Spanish Civil War. He had gone to Spain pumped with pride in his newfound communism and energized by a return to a kind of military service.

(As a young man in the First World War, he had joined the Canadian Army on the day war was declared and served as a stretcher-bearer at Ypres; later, after returning home wounded and finishing medical school, he served as a surgeon in the Royal Navy. At the close of the war, he donned a different uniform as a medical officer in the nascent and not yet royal Canadian Air Force.)

Scandalized by his rough social behaviour, financial mismanagement, and adversarial relations with the Spanish government, the Communist Party ordered him home—shortly before, as the Stewarts document, the Spanish republic planned to expel him. The joint American Canadian medical mission to China—two alcoholic doctors and a nurse-translator—could have been a disaster. But for whatever reason—an inner phoenix, deep vocation, or simply the existential reality of living in crisis—Bethune met the challenge of providing medical service to an impoverished peasant army with genuine, if reckless, heroism. On the eve of his forty-ninth birthday, working in an improvised field hospital, he performed nineteen operations. He had often been accused of recklessness, primarily with women and with the lives of patients. In China, that recklessness became ferocious energy in an increasingly depleted body. A careless cut with a scalpel brought sepsis and death.

There have been several biographies of Bethune since Ted Allan and Sydney Gordon’s 1952 myth-making *The Scalpel and the Sword*, several of them written by Roderick Stewart. For Stewart, finding Bethune and traces of Bethune has been a life’s work. This latest biography, co-written with Stewart’s wife and fellow researcher, began as a revision of his earlier *Bethune* (1973) but, as described in the preface, turned into a wholly new project that revisited old archives and found new ones. The research behind it is exhaustive and compelling, particularly in the presentation of recent findings regarding his time in China. The result is an extremely engaging—at times enthralling—page-turner.

Bethune loomed large in the lives of people who knew him, and many wrote their impressions in letters and memoirs. These coalesce into a persuasive consensus of an obsessive, manic, and grandiose personality who was also brilliant, inventive, and charming. He was an adversarial figure in just about every realm of his life (as Marian Scott—wife of F. R. and his great unconsummated passion—remarked, the women he slept with he fought with). It is hard to escape the conclusion that Bethune was one of those men who fell in love with war, and the more it angered him, the more he needed it.

Bethune was avid in his writing, as he was in most of his activities. Although he was not a literary author, his final letter to his closest friends before leaving for Spain, in which he wrote that “the function of the artist is to disturb,” became a widely circulated manifesto after his Canadian rehabilitation in the 1970s, as did his short essay, “Wounds,” published in *The Daily Worker* after his death. But he haunts Canadian literary culture, rubbing shoulders (and sometimes more) with writers and painters in his lifetime, and personifying a radical, intemperate, and tantalizingly un-Canadian political masculinity to writers, playwrights, and filmmakers since. In the pages of this biography, he emerges as yet more human and more abject, and more admirable because of it.

BIOGRAPHY

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