

BOOK REVIEW

Phoenix: The Life of Norman Bethune. Roderick Stewart and Sharon Stewart. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011. Price: \$39.95. ISBN: 9780773538191. 478 pages.

Henry Norman Bethune (1890-1939), Canadian surgeon, adventurer, artist, and socialist, has had his story told before in scientific journals, motion pictures, television miniseries, and books. Now, the most prolific of his biographers, Roderick and Sarah Stewart, put all together in 478 pages. They do not withhold details of the first 45 years of Bethune's life as a brawling, alcoholic philanderer. Their major interest is in Bethune the person and not necessarily in his accomplishments in putting into place the first volunteer donor program, one that brought blood to the front lines in the Spanish civil war. They do bring together a timeline that establishes the details of that blood operation that made him famous. After that there was his brilliant activity in the China that was resisting Japanese occupation. All of those activities were accomplished in the last 3 years of Bethune's life after he left the Canada that he had grown to dislike but now make him remembered there as "a person of national historic significance" and in China as a hero of the people.

The first half of the book details Bethune's surgical training in London, Edinburgh, and even the Mayo Clinic and his lifelong interest in women. He married one of them twice and divorced her twice. Together they opened a private practice in Detroit in 1924, serving its poor but soon acquiring an understanding of the advantages of the rich. After that there was advanced surgical training and then excellent hospital positions in Montreal where he continued to alternate between playing the gentleman and the alcoholic fool, bedding the wives of his colleagues. His major mentor was surgeon Edward Archibald, who had used transfusion in World War I.

The Stewarts tell it all as a contrast to what was to happen in the final 3 years of Bethune's life after he attended an International Congress on Physiology in Moscow in 1935. Back in Canada and on travels to the United States, he gave speeches about the "religious and spiritual aspects of Marxism" and joined the Communist Party of Canada. What followed was a year agitating for a more socialistic society. He felt Canada closing in on him and saw himself as a "big frog in a small pond." He fled finally from his ongoing discontent by agreeing to go to Spain for the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (CASD). It called him "Canada's ambassador to Spain." That organization, backed by Communist sympathizers, was one of the groups supporting the Republicans, the elected, socialistic government of Spain that had been attacked by Fascist elements of its own Army led by Francisco Franco.

Bethune arrived in Madrid by plane from France in November 1936 at the age of 45 to begin the 3 years that have made him famous. He knew no Spanish but the CASD had arranged that he be joined there by Henning Sorenson, another Montreal Communist who spoke fluent Spanish. They spent several days meeting with medical elements only to find that there were enough foreign surgeons already in Spain. Then, on a train journey to Valencia to spend the Canadian money on the purchase of ambulances, Bethune instead proposed to Sorenson the idea of providing blood support for the troops. That was not unlikely since he had received surgical training and transfusion knowledge from Edward Archibald and heard stories of soldiers saved by blood. The Stewarts track his travels to point out that Bethune, with monies provided by his Canadian supporters developed his concept independently of the blood operation of Frederic Duran Jorda that had already been supporting Republican fighters out of Barcelona since August of 1936.

Any argument as to who was first is not useful. Both Bethune and Duran Jorda introduced voluntary donation on the scale that we do today. Their basic technology for collection and shipment of citrated blood was not new. It had been presented after years of research by the Russians at the International Transfusion Congress in Rome in 1935. The differences between the two were that the earlier one of Duran Jorda had a complex system of blood collection, combined the blood from six donors, and delivered it to military hospitals in pressurized containers, a system that would not work today. Bethune applied the more modern concept of single units and carried them directly to the front lines. Duran Jorda's work was more deliberate and scientific, whereas Bethune's must have suffered from lack of technical expertise and supervision. For neither operation are data available on outcomes.

The Instituto Canadiense de Transfusion de Sangre transfused its first patient on January 3, 1937. Four and a half months later it was taken over by the Spanish Sanidad Militar and Bethune had been forced out under a cloud of whiskey and women. The Stewarts describe his recall as requested by Sorenson and the other Canadians on the transfusion team who saw their leader's aggressive escapades as hurting Canada's image in Spanish eyes. The triggering event was a repeat of another Bethune involvement with a female companion, one who had stayed for months and assumed administrative control during a Sorenson absence. Bethune refused to reduce her role and Sorenson, who had been the voice and negotiator of the unit with the Republican Army, left "in disgust" over the vulgar partying, sex, and diversion of funds. By mid-May, Bethune was in Paris living well on CASD money and on June 2 he was en route back across the Atlantic under escort by a member of the Communist Party of Canada.

The Stewarts state that Bethune realized finally that his own behavior had led to his downfall.

The CASD had already prepared for a triumphal money-raising tour by Bethune with his propaganda film, *The Heart of Spain*. After a tumultuous welcome, June to October 1937 were spent on the road in the United States as well as Canada with the film that demonstrated blood collection and usage against a background of the war. He raised thousands of dollars but tired of that role and asked to be sent back to Spain. The CASD had received a police report on his activities there and refused his request. Instead he was offered a medical mission in support of the Chinese Communists who were fighting the Japanese invasion. It was to be a joint effort of both Communist Parties of Canada and the United States. Bethune went to New York for 3 months of fund-raising and then set sail to arrive in Shanghai in January 1938 to begin "his last fling."

China at first presented Bethune with frustrations that caused him to respond with his typical irritation and anger. His biographers describe a Bethune who really only "arrived" after he met Mao Zedong, Head of the Communist Party and its armies. In China, unlike Spain, Bethune was the only surgeon who came to volunteer. Mao recognized his potential value, made him a member of the Communist Party of China, and gave him authority to organize a front-line service for the wounded. Bethune's early disdain for Chinese surgeons who had been unable to apply Traditional Chinese Medicine to the actuality of war changed into an acceptance of the role of their teacher. He had adequate translation support and taught hands-on surgery, wrote manuals for wartime surgery, designed hospitals, and introduced sanitation. Working ceaselessly along the battlefields, he bound the wounds of the common soldier who before had known only westerners more interested in soul than body. They adored him. The generals supported him. There is no record, other than the giving of his own blood in direct transfusion and encouraging others to do so, that Bethune was involved with transfusion in China.

His biographers, Roderick Stewart who had spent time in China during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1972 and his wife, Sharon, who returned there with him in 2005, have given a detailed story of Bethune's magnificent accomplishments there. They record his activities, the opinions of the people he met, and his change from the egocentric, alcoholic, philandering swashbuckler into a caregiver who now derived his personal satisfaction from helping others. Between March 1938 and November 1939, Bethune, separated from whiskey and women, had found what he needed so badly was recognition by others that they needed him. The book must be read to appreciate the total devotion that the Bethune of China gave to people. His end came in November 1939 when he succumbed to septicemia from a cut sustained in operating on a soldier's gangrenous wound; no gloves were available. He rests there in a hero's grave.

After his death, the Bethune of Canada was still remembered by Archibald, his surgical mentor, as an "entirely amoral" egocentric. The Bethune of Spain is remarkable for what he accomplished there, despite those character flaws. In total contrast, Chairman Mao Zedong remembered the Bethune of China as a man of moral integrity with "utter devotion to others without any thought of self."

The biography is titled from a letter Bethune sent to one of his lovers in the transition year of 1935. He wrote that he was in need of "an altar" on which to immolate himself and "rise again like a phoenix from the ashes." The Phoenix was Bethune's own classical reference to himself as the fabled bird that rises from one great life to attain another. This reviewer sees him rather as the allegorical Pilgrim who escapes the Slough of Despond and progresses through the Valley of the Shadow of Death to earn the Celestial City.

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