

Phoenix: The life of Norman Bethune

Roderick Stewart and Sharon Stewart

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"I come of a race of men violent, unstable, of passionate convictions and wrong-headedness, intolerant yet with it all a vision of truth and a drive to carry them on to it..." When Norman Bethune wrote these words he may well have been referring to his Scottish ancestors. His grandfather, also Norman, had returned to Toronto with the FRCS Edinburgh, to build a thriving surgical practice and become a professor of surgery, both of which he lost through problems with alcohol and with finances. This was to provide a foretaste of the adventurous and colourful life of his famous grandson. What a subject for biography! Bethune was dynamic, irascible, motivated by high ideals, creative and artistic, yet flawed in his relationships with people and with alcohol.

All of these characteristics and more are explored in Roderick and Sharon Stewart's new, comprehensive biography of one of the most intriguing surgical figures of the 20th century. If Norman Bethune makes for a fascinating biographical subject, then Roderick and Sharon Stewart prove to be ideal biographers.

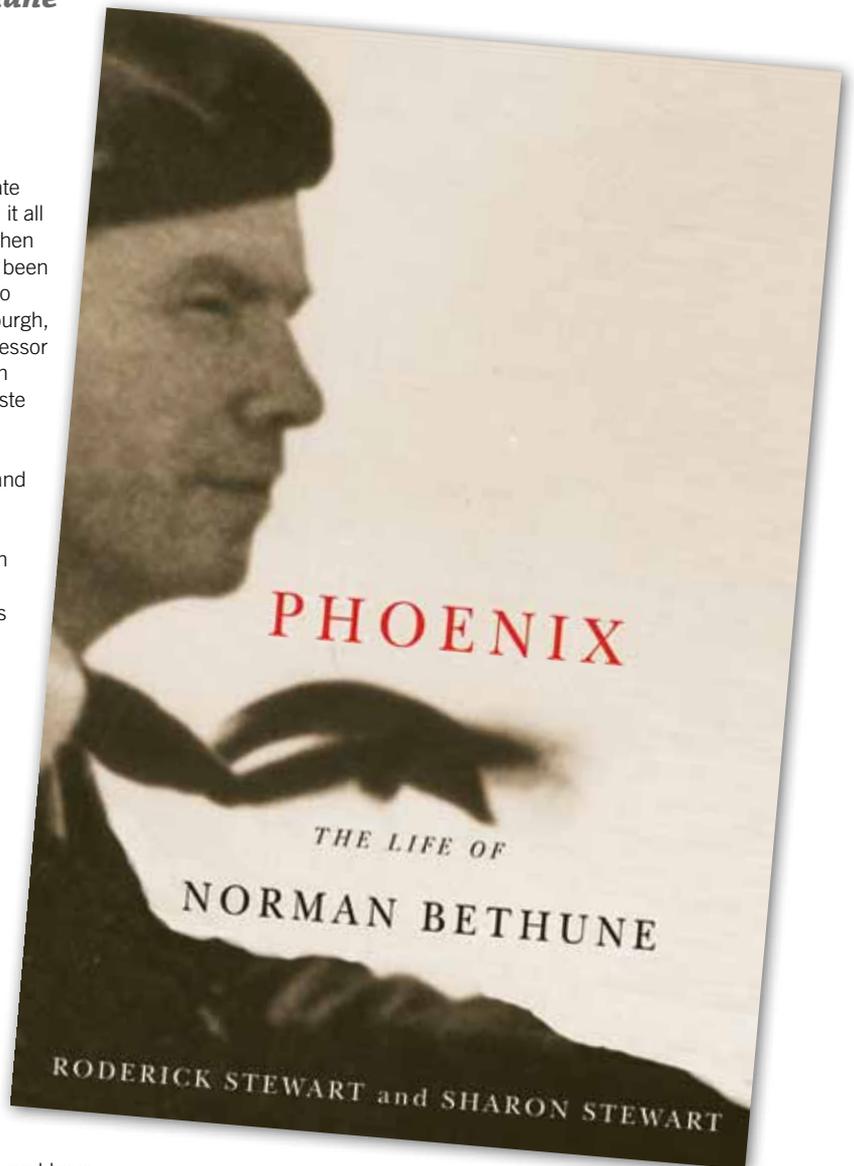
"Bethune was dynamic, irascible, motivated by high ideals, creative and artistic, yet flawed in his relationships with people and with alcohol"

Roderick Stewart has been researching and writing about Bethune for four decades, and now, joined by his wife, has retraced Bethune's footsteps in Canada, Britain, Spain and China, to jointly write what must be the definitive biography. They have interviewed people who knew their subject personally, and have drawn upon archives and sources from around the world, some of which have only recently been released.

Phoenix makes compelling reading. It traces Bethune's upbringing in Ontario, his service as a stretcher bearer in WW1, surgical training in Britain and Canada where he practised as a thoracic surgeon. While this sounds conventional, his life was anything but that. When he married Francis Penny, daughter of a well-to-do Edinburgh lawyer, and told her "now I can make your life a misery, but will never bore you", his words proved prophetic on both counts. They divorced, remarried and divorced again, yet she always retained a special place in his affections.

The Stewarts conclude that Bethune had a personality disorder, blessed with charm and wit, yet arrogant, short-tempered, and a facile liar with an inability to sustain relationships. These traits, and others, even less attractive, recur throughout the book. As a thoracic surgeon in Canada his technique was described as 'fast' and 'far from neat' in keeping perhaps with his impatience, impetuosity, and volatile temperament.

The book describes how, drawn to Marxism, he became a passionate and outspoken advocate for socialised medicine in North America, joining the Communist Party at a time when this was not only unpopular but barely legal in Canada. This led him to



join the fight against fascism in the Spanish Civil War, where he set up a mobile blood transfusion service. Yet, almost predictably, his ability to get along with his Republican colleagues forced a return home to Canada.

The final third of the book describes in some detail Bethune's final two years, spent in China as a military surgeon, mostly with the Eighth Route Army under Mao Zedong. This is an appropriate allocation of space, since Bethune's legacy and his fame has been largely the result of his adulation in China. Mao's eulogy ("...we must all learn the spirit of absolute selflessness from him...") became one of the three most-read articles in China.

Phoenix is both readable and authoritative. It dispels many of the myths which have grown around Bethune, and presents him warts and all. The book will be a valuable contribution to history's view of Bethune. Despised and then celebrated in Canada, will he continue to be idolised as China slowly distances itself from Maoist thoughts? Only time will tell. ●

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