

Phoenix: the Life of Norman Bethune

Roderick Stewart and Sharon Stewart

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On the dust cover of *Phoenix*, Bethune is described as 'one of the most famous Canadians in history'. In the text, he said to be 'the best-known Canadian in the world'. I suspect that these assertions will come as a surprise to many non-Canadian readers but they are sustained, at least quantitatively, by Bethune's enormous fame in the world's most populous country, China. How he achieved such acclaim is indeed an extraordinary story, told here in scholarly detail but with a light touch, in an attractive prose style.

Bethune was born in 1890 in Ontario, the son of a Presbyterian minister. Like many a son of the manse, he rejected both his parents' faith and their style of life. Despite his enormous talent, vigour and inventive intelligence, his early career as a surgeon was troubled, as was his private life. The Stewarts do not flinch from an honest account of his alcohol abuse, his money problems, and his 'unsatisfactory' and somewhat squalid sex life. Such was his personal chaos that, while Chief of the Department of Thoracic Surgery, Hopital du Sacre Coeur, Montreal, he was reduced to camping in the grounds of the hospital. Bethune's behaviour was so erratic and unpredictable that his biographers speculate whether he suffered from a borderline personality disorder.

In mid-life Bethune found a new faith, communism. He denounced the iniquity of treating medical care 'as if it were a luxury product' and argued for the benefits of socialised provision delivered by salaried staff. His convictions led him to go to Spain in 1936 to organise and lead a mobile blood transfusion unit in support of the Republican troops in the Civil War. However even this venture was not successful and he returned to Canada dispirited and rejected, professionally and personally. But a remarkable redemption was at hand. In 1937, he arrived in China and offered his services to the Eighth Route Army, engaged in desperate fighting against Japanese aggression. Bethune worked with astonishing energy, performing thousands of operations, training Chinese staff, organising the military medical service, designing model hospitals, and writing a textbook on battlefield surgery. Under the conditions of guerilla warfare, he was shielded from the temptations of sex and alcohol, and his impatience and authoritarianism, character flaws in civilian Canada, became virtues. His 'quick, rough and bold' style of operating was well suited to battlefield conditions.

Bethune died in 1939 of septicaemia, having cut himself with a scalpel while operating. Eulogised by Mai Zedong himself, he was proclaimed a hero of international

communism, a status he retains in modern China. Bethune's rise to posthumous fame in his native country came later, and how it was achieved is one of the most intriguing passages of this fascinating book. The Stewarts have borrowed several of their chapter titles from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* - it is hard to tell whether this is intended ironically or not. But *Phoenix* can certainly be thoroughly recommended, both as an authoritative, yet very readable, biography of a remarkable man, and as shedding light on an important episode in the early history of international medical interventions.

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