

BOOK REVIEW

PHOENIX. The Life of Norman Bethune. by Roderick and Sharon Stewart. McGill & Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston, London, Ithaca, 2011.

THE STORY OF Norman Bethune has been a preoccupation of, and subject of publications by, Roderick Stewart over more than 4 decades, culminating in this comprehensive and thoroughly documented biography jointly authored with his wife Sharon. The Stewarts have traveled extensively in Canada, the United States, Spain, and China, gathering material on the activities of Bethune during the various phases of his colorful career.

The book falls naturally into 3 main parts. The first addresses his childhood, youth, and the evolution of his medical career. The second, that piece for which he is known in the transfusion field, involves his development of a mobile transfusion service in the Spanish civil war in 1936-1937 delivering blood to frontline surgical services; and the third discusses his activities in support of Mao Zedong and the Communist struggle against the Japanese invasion in 1938-1939.

The first section traces the career of this rather narcissistic, egocentric individual, through military service in The Great War, his surgical training in England, his rather bohemian social life, his unfortunate marriage, his career as a surgeon in Detroit, and his encounter with tuberculosis and how it influenced both his professional evolution as a surgeon in Montreal and his political shift to "leftist" ideals. This latter period was a time of rather transient achievements against a background, for someone in his professional position in Montreal, of highly unconventional social conduct. His work as a thoracic surgeon, dealing with the high prevalence of pulmonary tuberculosis in an indigent population, helped move his political ideology in the direction of what we would now call socialized medicine; and his attempts to promote this approach to health care were rejected, much to his frustration. This section of the biography, besides being a study in character evolution, provides interesting insights into the nature of medical practice between the wars, particularly in the United States and Montreal,

with overtones a little reminiscent of Cronin's novel *The Citadel*.

The second section, although covering only about 8 months of Bethune's professional life, occupies nearly 20% of the biography and is likely to be the section of most direct interest to readers of this Journal. The convoluted organizational and political arrangements for the operation of Bethune's transfusion service and the tensions arising from Bethune's desire for freedom from oversight of, and interference in, the operation of his transfusion service are examined. The impact on Bethune's operation of increasing involvement of the Spanish military in the detailed administration of the conduct of the war including medical matters, and the activities of other contributors to medical services related to Bethune's service are described in some detail. Somewhat less detail is provided on the purely technical aspects of the service. In the end, in the context of the increasing strain of operating an expanding service over a wide geographic area, Bethune's extravagant behavior (involving alcohol and womanizing) alienated members of his own team to the point of their advocating his removal from Spain. This, combined with Spanish government "paranoia" about foreign espionage and, probably, local professional jealousies undermining his position, led to Bethune's repatriation to Canada in June of 1937 as something of a hero. Although he worked effectively to raise funds to support the Spanish mission (which continued until 1939), his need for more action remained; and it was not long before he sought another outlet for his restless energies.

The third section describes that outlet. Bethune joined an American-sponsored medical mission to support the communist Chinese forces in early 1938. The never-ending difficulties of this

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mission—interpersonal, logistical, technical, financial, travel, linguistic—are described in detail. Bethune's personal conduct appears to have improved somewhat, perhaps as a result of his unwanted dismissal from Spain or of diminished opportunity. Despite the difficulties and the appalling conditions under which he had to work, by dint of relentless effort, he not only dealt with individual patient care (including transfusions) but also began to set up facilities to train local Chinese in the basics of medical and nursing care. His efforts did not go unnoticed by the communist Chinese leadership, who held him in high regard; after Bethune died in November 1939 as a result of a surgical cut to a finger turned septic, Mao himself composed a eulogy dedicated

to Bethune and his work in China, where his name is revered to this day. This section provides a vivid insight into the conditions under which the Sino-Japanese war was conducted and the state of China in the late 1930s.

All in all, this biography is a fascinating account of the life of an eccentric, highly driven, colorful individual and champion of the underprivileged and downtrodden, interwoven through some of the major events of the first half of the 20th century.

Peter H. Pinkerton

Department of Clinical Pathology
Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

E-mail address: peter.pinkerton@sunnybrook.ca