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Book Review: *Phoenix: The Life of Norman Bethune*

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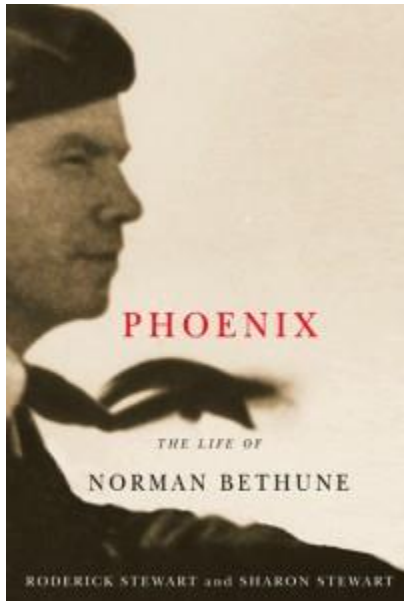
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[Book Review: *Phoenix: The Life of Norman Bethune*](#)

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Stewart, Roderick and Sharon. [Phoenix: The Life of Norman Bethune](#). Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011. xiii, 464 pp.

By David Webster

Millions of Chinese have memorized Mao Zedong's 1939 lines "[In Memory of Norman Bethune](#)," written soon after the Canadian surgeon's death amidst the war against Japan. As a result, Bethune remains the best-known Canadian in China, still outstripping comedian Dashan (Mark Rowswell).¹

"Comrade Bethune's spirit, his utter devotion to others without any thought of self, was shown in his great sense of responsibility in his work and his great warm-heartedness towards all comrades and the people," Mao wrote, extolling Bethune's "spirit of absolute selflessness." If Bethune was pure selflessness and internationalist heroism after coming to China, it was only after arising phoenix-like from a selfish, dissolute life plagued by betrayal, self-aggrandizement, brushes with death and perhaps mental illness, according to the authors of a new biography.

Roderick and Sharon Stewart trace Bethune's life from his youth in the small towns of Upper Canada to his death in the Shanxi-Hebei border area, the result of infection incurred while operating on a People's Liberation Army fighter. The figure that emerges is heroic only in the sense that he finally found "my mission in life" (p. 294) once he arrived in China in 1938 to work as a battlefield surgeon.

Roderick Stewart's interest in Bethune runs back to the 1960s, and he has published three previous biographies on aspects of Bethune's life. This book, co-authored with his wife Sharon Stewart, draws on additional research in China, Canada, and Spain. With documentary sources

drawn from almost a hundred different archives, it is unlikely to be surpassed in depth of research or attention to Bethune's psyche.

His life, the Stewarts argue, "exhibits recurrent cycles of achievement and self-destruction—the pattern of the phoenix." Brought up by a Protestant minister, his faith turned from religion to communism, and he was "driven throughout his life to act as a saviour" (p. 375). This did not prevent a history of bullying of comrades, his off-and-on wife, and periodic alcoholism.

The young Bethune was conservative and loyal to the British Empire. Family tradition has him the eighth man in Toronto to volunteer to fight in the First World War. At the same time, he rebelled against the strict Christian moral code of his parents, insisting on drinking liquor on his visits home—though he agreed to take his drinks into the bathroom to avoid corrupting others.

Bethune trained to become a surgeon. The poverty of many of his patients led him towards the political left—first to the social-democratic League for Social Reconstruction, Canada's answer to the British Fabian Society (this partly out of attraction to the wife of one of the League's founders, social activist Marian Dale Scott). After visiting the Soviet Union, he became a secret member of the Canadian Communist Party. Secrecy, the party hoped, would make him a more credible activist during the campaign to raise funds for Republican Spain as it fought fascist forces in the 1930s.

Bethune chafed under these restrictions and under party discipline, and sought adventure and service in the Spanish Civil War, the international left's great cause of the 1930s. There, he created a mobile blood transfusion unit designed to operate near the battlefield, but was removed from his post by the Canadian Communist Party over his heavy drinking, womanizing and misuse of donations for such purposes as buying himself monogrammed shirts in Paris. The Spanish authorities refused to permit him re-entry into the country, though this was kept quiet because of his value as a passionate speaker and fundraiser in Canada. The Bethune who left Spain, never to be permitted back, was a flawed hero at best.

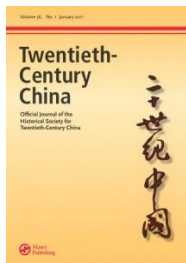
More importantly, he was a man desperately in search of a mission, a cause where he could serve communism and his own thirst for adventure. The desire to aid Communist China, besieged by imperial Japan, combined with "the opiate of action" (p. 268) to draw Bethune across the Pacific. Phoenix tells the story of Bethune in China in five detailed chapters. Bethune was able to convince the US and Canadian Communist Parties to jointly sponsor a small medical mission of himself and two others—neither of whom he could get along with for long. One called him "nothing but a bloody missionary" (p. 264) while a missionary doctor who worked side by side on surgeries with Bethune commented: "The Angel Gabriel couldn't get along with Norman Bethune. He's a horrible man" (p. 295).

Meeting Mao, Zhu De, and other lions of Chinese communism left Bethune inspired by their ascetic and whole-hearted commitment to the cause (and flattered when Mao remarked that he resembled Lenin). On the other hand, he saw desperate medical conditions, to which he reacted with "his usual combination of compassion and rage" (p. 287). Shouting at local people was the first reaction; working to build more effective and sanitary treatment his second. Bethune embraced the life of a local partisan, refusing extra rations and giving much of his food to others,

sacrificing personal comforts of any sort, and over-working himself in ways that risked his health. He created medical mobile units able to operate with great effectiveness close to combat, and this added to his growing legend.

It was entirely characteristic, then, that Bethune died because his finger became infected during an operation in which he used no gloves, and that he continued to operate even knowing his hand was infected. His legend was such, the Stewarts argue, that no one dared stop him and save his life by amputating. A New Zealand journalist perhaps summed it up best: “he wanted to be a hero or a martyr of the Revolution, at any cost” (p. 258). In his China work in 1939-39 and in his death, perhaps, Bethune earned both.

1. In 2011, 68% of Chinese surveyed knew Bethune, while 29% knew Dashan and others trailed far behind. Yuchao Zhu, “Making Sense of Canada’s Public Image in China,” paper presented at conference on “Canada-China Relations: past, present and future,” University of Regina, October 2011.



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