

From Saturday's Books section

China's Canadian hero

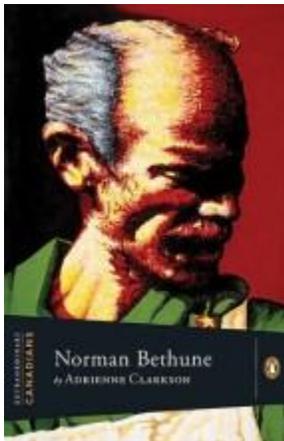
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Since Norman Bethune's heroic death at 49 in the mountains of China, during the Japanese invasion, the struggle over his legacy has become almost as dramatic as his life had been.

In 1952, Montreal writers and Communist Party faithfuls Ted Allan and Sidney Gordon published the first biography of the maverick Canadian surgeon, *The Scalpel, the Sword*. Though it moved many readers, the book was an unreliable hagiography stuffed with invented dialogue and lacking footnotes, an index or any other scholarly apparatus. More than half the book was set in China, where the two authors had not set foot. They drew liberally on a 1948 Chinese novel by Zhou Erfu, *Doctor Norman Bethune*, which they forgot to acknowledge.



Norman Bethune, by Adrienne Clarkson, Penguin Canada, 200 pages, \$26

Thereafter, Allan, who had a brief friendship with Bethune in Montreal and Spain, laid claim to the letters and other materials the Communist Party of Canada had provided to him for research purposes, and restricted their use. In any case, there was scant interest until after 1971, when Canada established diplomatic relations with “Red” China, where the doctor's burial place is a national shrine.

Allan used Bethune's legacy for personal gain, going so far as to threaten to sue Roderick Stewart when the latter wrote *Bethune*, a less tendentious biography, in 1973. Allan's epic battles

with actor Donald Sutherland about matters of interpretation on the set of the 1990 biopic *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* helped to turn that film into a disaster.

Historian Larry Hannant has called Allan's claim of owning Bethune's copyrights "legally dubious and morally baseless." Nevertheless, Hannant was forced to sign a deal just weeks before Allan's death to hand over half the net proceeds of his (Hannant's) book *The Politics of Passion: Norman Bethune's Writing and Art*, which the University of Toronto Press issued in 1998.

...Perhaps the most inspired pairing of author and subject in Penguin Canada's Extraordinary Canadians series to date

In the 14 years since Allan died, Bethune is beginning to come into clearer focus. Adrienne Clarkson arrives at the right moment with her compact biography *Norman Bethune* to sum him up for a new generation of readers.

Her strength is her knowledge of Canadian social, cultural and political history, into which she inserts Bethune. The Chinese have claimed him as their own, though he spent only 20 months in their country. Clarkson reclaims him, showing how thoroughly a Canadian product this original *médecin sans frontières* was.

His ethic of service to others was shaped by his experiences as the son of a Presbyterian minister, growing up in small towns atop the Canadian Shield. To earn his university fees, he worked in northern lumber camps teaching rough immigrant men to read for Frontier College. Here, in the years before the First World War, he developed a particularly Canadian sort of fortitude and self-reliance (and likely was infected with tuberculosis, which did not show itself until years later).

He was attuned to both of Canada's founding cultures, leaving his prestigious position at Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal to head the surgical team at Sacré-Coeur, a French-speaking hospital run by nuns, where he was greatly appreciated.

Neither did he miss out on the Great War, the nation's formative experience. He was a stretcher-bearer at the second Battle of Ypres, nearly losing his leg to a shrapnel wound.

Clarkson points out that Bethune's childhood coincided with a time of evangelical fervour. His father, Rev. Malcolm Bethune, was a follower of Dwight Moody, who preached the goal of evangelizing the whole world in one generation. No country offered more souls to save than China. At the end of the 19th century, 25 missionary societies in Toronto were sending missionaries there.

Near the end of his life, Bethune exploded with fury when Jean Ewen, a feisty Chinese-speaking Toronto nurse who assisted him in China, called him a missionary. Yet Ewen (left entirely out of *The Scalpel, the Sword*) was close to the mark.

Clarkson offers no explanation of Bethune's complete estrangement from his family, nor does she shed much new light on his stormy marriage, divorce, remarriage and second divorce from

his Scottish wife Frances, a shallow gold digger. “They did not have any children and reading some of Bethune's letters to her, you wonder if they ever really had sex,” she writes.

She is insightful in her description of Bethune's struggle in his late 30s with tuberculosis and his stay at the Trudeau sanatorium on Saranac Lake, N.Y., which ended when he insisted on trying a risky new therapy, the artificial collapse of his diseased lung. The procedure resulted in his complete recovery and led to his decision to become a thoracic surgeon in order to defeat the scourge of TB. In the 1920s, 48,000 Canadians came down with it every year, and many who could not afford good medical care died.

“He fought the disease on two fronts – as a doctor and as a social activist,” Clarkson writes. As a doctor, he invented new surgical tools, of which the Bethune rib shearers are still in use. As a social activist, he argued for free health care.

But he was also a painter, founder of a children's art school and a published poet and short-story writer, who was most at home among Montreal's unconventional artistic community. “I am an artist,” he wrote. “I work through intuition.”

His friends included painters such as Fritz Brandtner, John Lyman, Edwin Holgate, Anne Savage and Marian Dale Scott, with whom he fell deeply in love. “She was the unique love of his life,” writes Clarkson, the first biographer to make use of their highly charged correspondence.

“You are my sister – we think alike, act alike and feel alike,” Bethune wrote to the woman he called Pony. “I want you as a man wants a woman.” Both knew that it was a dangerous affair (she was married) and backed off from it at the last minute, a renunciation that Clarkson terms “elegant.”

Surprisingly, though, she omits any mention of his subsequent affair with Toronto painter Paraskeva Clark, who was just as married. Bethune encouraged Clark to use the subject matter of her Russian childhood in her art, and when he returned from Spain to fundraise in Toronto and across Canada, he brought her the objects that went into her greatest still life, *Presents from Madrid*: a red scarf, a Spanish magazine, a sheet of music, a soldier's hat from the International Brigade.

“He was my boyfriend,” Clark told me when I interviewed her in 1983.

By 1935, when he joined the Communist Party of Canada, Bethune was alarmed by the rise of fascism in Europe. Frustrated that Canada, the United States and Britain insisted on maintaining neutrality in the Spanish Civil War, while Nazi Germany and Mussolini in Italy supplied troops and warplanes to Franco's forces, he spent seven hectic months aiding the Republican cause by organizing the first mobile blood-transfusion service along the front. His creation of a blood bank (at the time, transfusions were generally person-to-person) predated by a full year the creation of the first blood bank in North America, in Chicago.

Bethune's speaking tour for the Spanish cause in 1937 ended in Vancouver, where he embarked for China on the *Empress of Asia*.

Clarkson summarizes the hardships he faced in China, and the superhuman effort he made to treat the thousands wounded by Japanese bombing, while lacking adequate supplies of soap, gloves, bed sheets, medicines, buckets, basins, splints, prosthetic legs – almost everything needful. When he was not operating, he was training teenage peasants to be nurses and assistant doctors.

Clarkson knows China and in Yan'an visited the spare, whitewashed room where the sole meeting between Bethune and Mao Zedong took place in April, 1938. According to Jean Ewen's memoirs, the two looked at each other for a moment, then embraced as brothers, before talking all through the night.

Here the reader has to remind herself this took place before Mao turned into one of the greatest mass murderers in history.

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Judy Stoffman is a Toronto writer, critic and literary journalist.

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