

“Born a Bourgeois. Died a Communist”: Cultural Portrayals of Dr. Norman Bethune

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Sometimes called “the most famous Canadian” for his popularity in China as a result of his medical work with the Eighth Route Army—and his political usefulness to the Communist Part of China as an example of proletarian internationalism—Dr. Norman Bethune has been comparatively unknown and ignored in his native Canada for years after his death. In the final and politically active years of his life, particularly after his return from Spain in 1938, Bethune could pack speaking events with Canadian audiences and raise great sums of money for the anti-fascist cause for which would die. More than seventy years after his death, he remains a contested and politically useful figure, represented differently by those who see in him values aligned with and of use to their own causes.

Bethune was born in Gravenhurst, Ontario on March 4th, 1890 to radically evangelical Presbyterian parents. His father was a minister, and so militant in his religious conviction he would order his children to eat handfuls of dirt to “teach them humility” (Stewart and Stewart 12). Many are willing to attribute some of Bethune’s revolutionary fervor and distrust of authority to his father’s overbearing and formative influence. Highly aware of the social standing granted to him at birth, when writing his own epitaph at a friend’s art studio in 1937 before leaving for the Spanish Civil War, he took a piece of canvas and scribbled on it, “Born a bourgeoisie [sic]. Died a communist” (Hannant 116). He attended medical school at the University of Toronto and practiced medicine and surgery in Detroit and Montréal. This medical work in impoverished areas during the Great Depression led him to believe free, socialized medicine was necessary in order to provide proper preventative and general medical care to all citizens. After a

1935 visit to the Soviet Union, ostensibly to attend a conference but actually to view the economic and health care related progress of the new socialist state, Bethune joined the Communist Party of Canada. In 1937, captivated by the anti-fascist cause, he volunteered and went to Spain to aid the Republican resistance against Franco and his Nationalist army. After some controversy, he was forced to leave Spain due to personality conflicts, bureaucratic machinations, and a hefty dose of government and party paranoia about ideological traitors and fascist fifth columnists. After a successful tour of Canada speaking and showing the film, *Heart of Spain*, through which he raised a great deal of money for “The Spanish Cause,” he volunteered to go to China and aid the communist Eighth Route Army resist the Japanese invasion. It was there he died of septicemia, after contracting an infected finger during surgery. A comprehensive timeline of Bethune’s life is available in Larry Hannant’s *The Politics of Passion: Norman Bethune’s Writing and Art*. Bethune captured the popular imagination of those people sympathetic to the Republican and antifascist causes, as well as the attention of the RCMP, with his trans-Atlantic radio broadcasts, pamphlets, and charismatic speaking tour. His place in the Canadian public memory has been preserved, and at times perverted, in biographies and fiction for the last three quarters of a century.

The issue at hand in this case study is not whether he was “a good communist,” how much Bethune drank, his impatience of bureaucratic missteps, his tumultuous love life, or even how many lives he saved in Spain and China. Instead, it is an examination of his treatment in biographies and other texts concerned with Bethune the person and Bethune the symbol, sometimes co-opted for political or personal gain. In the books examined, the basic chronology and biographical information of Bethune’s life is presented in a similar manner, but some of the specifics have been modified or left out, either deliberately or as a result of insufficient information being available. The differences can be understood in

three categories. Some texts have spun Bethune's life and legacy to be more easily used as a political tool. The other two major differences are closely related to the first. Some biographers ignore Bethune's encounter with controversy at the end of his time in Spain that resulted in his expulsion. Others overlook Bethune's tumultuous personal life, white washing it or ignoring it entirely, while others still focus too much on his personal failings, diverting attention away from his important medical and cultural contributions.

Bethune as a Political Tool

Dr. Norman Bethune and his legacy present an enticing, and at times lucrative, symbol of humanitarianism, political radicalism, and internationalism. Firmly ensconced amongst the bourgeoisie, a skilled and inventive surgeon, and a man who pledged himself to working for the global underclass—despite having the ability to make thousands of dollars a year during the great depression—Bethune's name was a welcome addition to any radical cause. He was not financially desperate, and the Marxist politics he shared with many of the impoverished and oppressed Canadian volunteers who went to Spain aimed to benefit these workers much more than Bethune and his professional colleagues. As such, he proved a valuable “respectable” addition to the Communist and anti-fascist causes. After his death, Bethune's legacy remained politically and financially profitable: books and films about his life have been and continue to be published and released.

Bethune did not fit the mold of a typical Canadian volunteer heading to Spain. Most were young men, living precariously with little or no employment, job security, or education. Bethune was a fairly established, successful, and reasonably respected physician. A great number of volunteers were recent immigrants to Canada from working class backgrounds. Bethune was from a well-established family with a long history of professional careers. His

father was a preacher, while his grandfather and namesake was also a physician named Dr. Norman Bethune. Because of his potential to earn a great deal of money and recognition, Bethune had a great deal to lose due to his radicalism: he placed his medical career in jeopardy with his commitment to the communist and anti-fascist causes. Working at Sacre-Coeur hospital in Montréal, which was operated by the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec, Bethune argued with other hospital employees about the war in Spain. Given the Vatican's support for Franco and the Nationalist uprising in Spain, Bethune was seriously at risk of losing his job at the hospital (Stewart and Stewart 138).

The Scalpel, The Sword by Ted Allan and Sydney Gordon was the first biography of Bethune, and as such, some factual inaccuracies were perhaps unavoidable. Setting aside some of the more insignificant errors, *The Scalpel, The Sword* is the work about Bethune in which his use as a political tool is most explicitly displayed. Some of the inaccuracies and omissions of the work, and its tendency toward “damning not by faint but by excessive praise” (Hannant 4), can be partially attributed to Allan's relationship with Bethune, and others because of the book's sponsor, the Communist Party of Canada. Larry Hannant, writing in *The Politics of Passion: Norman Bethune's Writing and Art*, asserts that a “substantial” amount of *The Scalpel, The Sword*, is based on a work of Chinese fiction, *Doctor Norman Bethune*, written by Zhou Erfu, a member of the Chinese Communist Party and published in 1948. For Allan, writing about Bethune was a project that involved considerable passion and a number of complicating factors. The two men knew each other on a personal level, having met socially in Montréal. Both were members of the Communist Party of Canada, and both had worked in the Canadian blood transfusion unit in Madrid. Allan admired Bethune, but also played a part in his expulsion from Spain. A confused report compiled by the Spanish authorities claims “that Ted Allan and Henning Sorensen's letter of complaint to the Communist Party of

Canada led to Bethune's recall from Spain" (Hannant 361). According to many accounts, the Spaniards who dealt with Bethune and the transfusion unit disliked serving under a foreigner (Stewart and Majada 110), and Bethune posed a roadblock to the bureaucrats of the Republican government who were pursuing their goal of consolidation of all military resources, including health services (101). The combination of bitterness of the associated Spaniards, wild and preposterous accusations of espionage by the government against Bethune and his lover Kasja Rothman, and of the concerns of the Canadians about Bethune's personal conduct (111) resulted in his ouster from Spain. While Allan was upset enough with Bethune's conduct in Spain to aid in his recall, his book entirely ignores Bethune's expulsion, making it appear as if he left entirely voluntarily. Given Canada's political climate in 1952, when the prevailing public discourse surrounding the Communist Party was predominantly negative, it is understandable that a negative presentation of a Communist hero was unlikely to come from a party loyalist. To write about the romantic affairs, multiple divorces, abortions performed, irascibility, drinking, and other controversial behaviours of Bethune would be exposing a man Allan greatly admired to criticism that would paint both him and his causes in a negative way. It is also worth explicating the Communist Party of Canada's involvement: having provided Bethune's documents to the authors (Hannant 369) and paid Gordon "a salary 'for some weeks' while he rewrote Allan's rough draft" (370), the party would certainly have a vested interest in keeping the reputation of one of its shining stars intact.

While Allan and Gordon had an interest in presenting Bethune as a model communist, more recent scholars have had a different focus. In his 1998 collection of Bethune's work, Hannant claims that Bethune's writing "was virtually bereft of either the trappings or the structural foundations of Marxist philosophy. What we see is a humanist in a red cape" (Hannant 9). Adrienne Clarkson follows in Hannant's footsteps in her *Norman Bethune*, quoting him in

saying Bethune was a “humanist in a red cape” and declaring, “[h]e was not philosophically or intellectually a person who would have become a Marxist political figure” (Clarkson 12). The dust jacket of Clarkson’s book declares that, in serving in China, Bethune “embodied a new Canadian spirit of internationalism.” Both of these assertions clash with some of Bethune’s own writings, and with Roderick Stewart’s analysis of his political views.

Stewart outlines reasons why radical left wing politics likely attracted Bethune, saying, “[h]e had no doubts about the philosophical basis of Marxism” (123). Like the radical and evangelizing Christians of his upbringing, “communists were committed to uprooting the evil and corrupt base of society;” Stewart also points to a shared “intensity of belief,” and impatience about social change shared by his father’s particular branch of Presbyterianism. He notes, too, that the communistic belief that violence was necessary to wrench political and economic power from the ruling classes enticed Bethune. Bethune once wrote to Marion Scott that he recognized “the absolute inevitability of the use of force and force alone as the only true persuader. Moneyed people will never give up money and power until subjugated by physical forces stronger than they possess” (124). Despite the assertions by Hannant and Clarkson that Bethune was not attracted to Marxist thought, he became very animated upon learning of the Marxist concept of dialectics (Hannant 162), wrote explicitly of the Marxist theory of the “withering away of the state” (290), and said he was “profoundly distrustful of social democracy and of the [Cooperative Commonwealth Federation]” because of their disavowal of the use of revolutionary force (82). These do not appear to be the beliefs and declarations of someone who does not believe in class struggle. The question, then, is why have Hannant and Clarkson set about to conceal Bethune’s ideological beliefs—beliefs that he felt so passionately about that he wrote them as his epitaph?

Perhaps the efforts to liberalize Bethune's legacy are an attempt to navigate the tricky course one must steer when writing his story and all the stories of the Spanish Civil War international volunteers. Focus on the conflict, long a forgotten war and a historical footnote, has traditionally been the purview of the far-left and so writing about it is a reclamation of left-wing history. Instead of committing to this work, Hannant and Clarkson appear to be trying to "update" Bethune's image for an era in which the conventional political discourse declares some form of liberalism is the sole ideological option. Some argue that with the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s the days of governmental repression and distrust of leftism are over, and that it is now acceptable to acknowledge Bethune's political convictions. Despite these claims, as recently as 2001 the Royal Canadian Mounted Police extensively censored documents released under the Freedom of Information Act concerning Bethune and his activities, and developed plans to monitor and organize surveillance on leftists (Lethbridge 15). In Clarkson's case, casting Bethune as a liberal internationalist is one way a way to sanitize him, rendering him safe for consumption by the general public as a part of Canada's office historical narrative. As a former Governor-General of Canada, perhaps the political position most representative of Canada's milquetoast liberal political establishment, Clarkson's liberalizing inclination should not be particularly surprising. This is Bethune as rewritten by a series of books on Canadian history, of which Clarkson's *Norman Bethune* is a part. Conceived as one of twenty books in a series titled "Extraordinary Canadians," Bethune gets lumped together with a motley collection of public figures. The list includes the media baron and capitalist Lord Beaverbrook; Louis Riel, the revolutionary Métis leader who has increasingly been claimed by the mainstream; Sir Wilfred Laurier, the Liberal politician who counts among his achievements begrudging military support to British imperial aggression in South Africa; and the comparatively politically inoffensive hockey player

Maurice Richard. It seems Bethune, with his support for armed overthrow of the capitalist classes, needed to be deradicalized before placement on a list of “Extraordinary Canadians” next to an aristocratic industrialist and minister of the British government such as Beaverbrook, or a mainstream politician from a liberal—or bourgeois—democracy such as Laurier. As Vladimir Lenin wrote in his canonical Marxist work *The State and Revolution*:

During the lifetime of great revolutionaries, the oppressing classes constantly hounded them, received their theories with the most savage malice, the most furious hatred and the most unscrupulous campaigns of lies and slander. After their death, attempts are made to convert them into harmless icons, to canonize them, so to say, and to hallow their *names* to a certain extent for the “consolation” of the oppressed classes and with the object of duping the latter, while at the same time robbing the revolutionary theory of its *substance*, blunting its revolutionary edge and vulgarizing it. (*The State and Revolution*, Chapter 1)

For radicals like Bethune and Riel, their entrance celebration in the prevailing discourse dilutes some of their original significance and the danger they posed to the status quo by minimizing their more radical demands and beliefs and instead presenting them as reformers by association with “respectable” public figures. Again, as Lenin wrote, this serves the function of appearing to concede ground to the radical left or to Métis people while actually undermining the political usefulness of their legacies to those who would continue their work.

Bethune’s Departure from Spain

The portrayals of Bethune’s unceremonious departure from Spain diverge prominently in the different biographies. *The Scalpel*, *The*

Sword spends only three of some three hundred pages on Bethune's departure from Spain. Bethune, in reality forcibly ejected from the country under threat of arrest, is portrayed as having voluntarily left after a suggestion he could be most useful spreading news of the Spanish cause in North America (155). *The Scalpel*, *The Sword* suggests that while Bethune wished to return to Spain after his speaking tour, he realized that many surgeons were flocking to Spain, making his presence redundant: "Spain needed help, but some was being given. In China doctors were needed even more urgently than Spain" (166).

Writing about Bethune's departure from Spain was also made very difficult by Franco's victory, which made the files of the Spanish Republican government inaccessible or destroyed them. Files concerning matters of the Soviet secret police or of the international volunteers who went to Spain were sealed in the Soviet Union, only being made available in the 1990s. Roderick Stewart's *Bethune*, first published in 1973, lacks these files. Fortunately for students of Bethune's life and Canadian involvement in the Spanish Civil War, Stewart has persisted in his writings on Bethune as more information has come to light, and as the passage of time has allowed for a more complete picture of Bethune's life. Stewart returned to his biographical subject when he later co-wrote *Phoenix* with Sharon Stewart. It is the longest and most comprehensive account of Bethune's life, from his birth in Gravenhurst, Ontario, to his death in rural China while aiding in the guerrilla war effort against the Japanese army. Stewart also published a book focused on Bethune's time aiding the Republican anti-fascist cause in Spain. It is appropriately titled *Bethune in Spain*, and was co-written with retired Spanish professor of literature Jesús Majada.

While Clarkson's work mentions accusations of espionage against Bethune, it does not explicitly draw out how or why he was expelled from Spain. Writing that Ted Allan, Hazen Sise, and

Henning Sorensen “wanted to protect him, basically from himself,” Clarkson asserts, “We will never know how they persuaded him to leave” (Clarkson 139).

Michael Petrou’s book *Renegades* dedicated a chapter to Bethune. Petrou was among the first to read through the declassified files on Bethune in an attempt to sort out what resulted in Bethune’s expulsion. He notes that paranoia about Trotskyists and fascist fifth columnists, (one and the same in the rhetoric of the USSR-aligned Communist Parties of the 1930s) in Republican controlled territory was rampant (Petrou 164). Petrou observes, “The details of this discord are unknown, but Bethune’s headstrong independence, arrogance, contempt for authority, and drinking were crucial factors.” Petrou, however, saw some of these qualities as crucial in forming Bethune’s worldview that committed him so passionately to the anti-fascist cause: “The very personality traits that propelled him to Spain and that allowed him to flourish in the early days of the siege of Madrid caused him to flounder when he became a cog in a much larger bureaucracy” (166).

Bethune’s personal life: ignored or over played

While stories of Bethune’s social and personal life, filled with drinking and romantic liaisons, add even more colour to already colourful biographies of medical innovation, radical politics, and battlefield medicine, the prominence or exclusion of the stories are of academic interest to those interested in cultural portrayals of Bethune. In handlings of Bethune’s personal life, the numerous uses of his legacy become clearer.

It is possible a number of the differences in his portrayal are a result of social taboos at the different times of publication. Tackling Bethune’s performance of an abortion on his ex-wife and another one of his lovers, or their literal performance of adultery in front of a photographer in order to obtain a divorce, would likely have been unpopular at the time of publication of *The Scalpel*, *The*

Sword. That, likely in combination with Allan's personal admiration of Bethune and the desire of the Communist Party of Canada (and the authors who were members of the party) to keep their most famous member's reputation clean, leads to a very glossy picture of Bethune. Besides many other omissions of certain of Bethune's behaviours, the book makes it appear as if one of his divorces from Frances was because he believed he was dying of tuberculosis and wished her to be happy. According to Stewart and Stewart's *Phoenix*, the divorce came after he left the sanatorium as a result of constant fighting between the couple, and had been foreshadowed by a separation (Stewart and Stewart, 57).

Stewart changes his approach to Bethune's personal life over the course of his writings. Unlike the later *Phoenix*, Stewart's *Bethune* does not include Bethune's two simultaneous romantic liaisons before he was married to Frances, does not include the two abortions Bethune performed, and does not focus much attention on Bethune's emotional affair with Marion Scott, a Montréal painter and who was married to the prominent socialist F.R. Scott. *Bethune* does, however, reveal how the surgeon's preoccupation with finding the fastest technique occasionally cost patients' lives (*Bethune*, 47) and spends a great deal of time outlining Bethune's hot temper, habit of spending a great deal of money when he was younger, and his general difficulty getting along with others. *Phoenix* continues in this vein, cataloguing Bethune's personal failures on a footing nearly equal to its cataloguing of his professional successes. *Bethune in Spain* changes tact, dedicating a great deal of the relatively short book to reproducing Bethune's own letters, radio broadcasts, and reports. The book also spends much less time on Bethune's personality, outlining some of his difficulties getting along with the military bureaucracy and the other members of the blood transfusion institute only as it pertains to his expulsion from Spain, not as the main thrust of the biographical narrative.

Larry Hannant, the author of *The Politics of Passion: Norman Bethune's Writing and Art* favourably compares Stewart's work to *The Scalpel, The Sword*, but does say that *Bethune*:

“shows signs of imbalance. It emphasizes his destructive traits over his positive energy... Indeed, neither biography satisfactorily deals with the question of transformation in Bethune's practice and outlook. Allan and Gordon present an unvarying saint, Stewart a sinner” (Hannant, 4).

Hannant responds to this imbalance by writing a sort of frame text of biographical information on Bethune, and placing Bethune's own writing within it. Allowing Bethune's own work to stand for itself shifts the focus to his positive contributions and energy, while Hannant's accompanying words provide some critical analysis and contextualization.

Clarkson agrees with Hannant that portrayals of Bethune were unbalanced. While acknowledging he was at times difficult to work with, Clarkson writes, “the portrayals of him in the 1970s in books and television and film lean too heavily on the idea of the manic, selfish, brilliant, uncontrollable person” (Clarkson 69).

The history of portrayals of Bethune in writing can be understood as a dialectical process, something that quite likely would have delighted Bethune. Speaking on the subject of what he saw during his 1935 trip to the Soviet Union, Bethune outlined his own dialectical strategy concerning representations of the USSR, and said he would aim to balance whatever opinions the other speakers took:

If they depreciated Russia, I would praise her, and if they praised, I would diminish her. This would not be done in a spirit of pure perversity, but from a concern for truth, which appears to me to consist, not infrequently, in the conjunction of apparently irreconcilable aspects of reality. (Hannant, 89).

When considering Allan and Gordon's overly rosy portrait of Bethune, Stewart's reaction to include as much about Bethune's

irascibility and personal turmoil as possible makes more sense. Hannant argued that Stewart's portrayal was overly critical, and Clarkson agreed. Ultimately, a synthesis of these divergent modes of writing begins to come together. In Stewart's most recent book, *Bethune in Spain*, he changes his approach again. Stewart both acknowledges Bethune's limitations, while ensuring that his accomplishments, particularly his cultural contributions such as his radio broadcasts or the film *The Heart of Spain*, take the most prominent place.

After studying the biographies, Bethune's medical contributions, and his art and writing it should be apparent that Bethune was, as a Toronto newspaper editorial put it at the time of his death, "an idealist who practiced his ideas, and an exceptionally dedicated and courageous man" (*Bethune* 167). While biographers have at times taken liberties with the man's legacy, recent information about his life has shed light on darker moments of his story, and have successfully humanized one of the most interesting Canadians of the 20th century. The most recent academic literature on Bethune is promising. The revelations provided by the release of Soviet intelligence files on his work in Spain have proven to clarify the controversy surrounding his time there. There still exists a risk that public discourse surrounding Bethune takes on a character of hero worship, as Canadian economic ties with China continue to make him a useful political tool for politicians of all, and often surprising, political stripes. A multidimensional and complicated figure is not particularly useful for those who would use Bethune to better Canadian relations with China and its developing capitalist economy, particularly considering Bethune's longtime portrayal in China as the ideal proletarian internationalist. Since Mao Tse-tung wrote his essay "In Memory of Norman Bethune," which became required reading for millions of Chinese students following the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1966, the Chinese intensity of celebration of Bethune's legacy has been unrivaled. Mao recognized Bethune's contributions to the

cause of international resistance against fascist aggression, both in Spain and in China. In light of these varying portrayals and characterizations of Bethune, critical reading of the works about Bethune is necessary in order to properly understand the man and his work. For anyone interested in reading more about Bethune, Stewart and Stewart's *Phoenix* is the most comprehensive biography, and Hannant's *Politics of Passion* is worthwhile reading to see Bethune's life laid out in terms of his own words and artistic production. Ultimately, Bethune's legacy should focus on his material and cultural contributions to anti-fascism, to leftism in Canada, and to medicine. The international cause of anti-fascism benefitted enormously from the participation of such a charismatic, politically and artistically astute, and active anti-fascist. Mao was correct in his recognition and celebration of Bethune's embodiment of "the internationalism with which we oppose both narrow nationalism and narrow patriotism" (Mao, "In Memory of Norman Bethune"). Bethune's internationalism can be emulated by those who wish to resist a coalition of "militarists" and "capitalists" who would launch wars for the sake of what he called "that terrible, implacable God of Business and Blood, whose name is Profit" (Hannant, 327). It is in this essay that his political understanding of the roots of fascism, and his abilities as a polemicist and pamphleteer are on greatest display. Most importantly, public discussion and study of Bethune can provide an introduction to an often-ignored time in Canadian history—and in Canadian politics—for scholars and the general public alike.

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