

This year marks the thirty-fifth anniversary of the death of a Canadian of remarkable and indeed unique achievements. He was controversial in life and has been obscure in death. Now, as relations between his native land and the People's Republic of China grow closer, he has begun to emerge from the shadows.

On Norman Bethune

[1890-1939]

It may be that to the Chinese all North Americans look alike—when Norman Bethune died near Mao Tse-tung's front lines on November 11, 1939, the Chinese, unable to find a Canadian flag, hung an American flag behind his head. He was buried as an authentic hero of the Chinese Revolution. Today only the name of Mao is more familiar to the Chinese.

In 1972 the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board officially designated him a Canadian of "national historic significance" in a ceremony at his birthplace in Gravenhurst, Ontario. This touched off public controversy with letters to editors and columnists; some Canadians said recognition had come too late, others that it should not have come at all. The attitude of most, however, may have been expressed by a Toronto newspaper which said: "A few Canadians, not blinded by the fact that he was a Communist, have long been aware that Dr. Bethune was an idealist who practised his ideals and an exceptionally dedicated and courageous man." He was that and a lot of other things too.

He was very much the child of his age, the age of Eugene O'Neill and Scott Fitzgerald, as well as John Reed. He was egotistical, discontented, unlucky in love, enormously skilled, both sickly (like O'Neill he spent formative months in a TB sanitarium) and tough, impatient and ambitious, and he did not suffer fools gladly. He was born in a Presbyterian manse in Gravenhurst, on the edge of the Muskoka Lakes district, one hundred miles north of Toronto, on March 3, 1890, a circumstance which he, in time, did not find surprising. Forty-five years later he wrote to a friend: "You must remember my father was an evangelist and I come of a race of men violent, unstable, of passionate convictions and wrong-headedness, intolerant yet with it all, having a

vision of truth and a drive to carry them on to it even though it leads, as it has done in my family, to their destruction."

He clashed with his mother (an evangelist too), whom he loved, and his father, whom he did not. Extraordinary attempts to make him conform—once his father pushed his face to the ground and made him eat dirt—taught him to rebel. At age nineteen he took a job teaching in a one-room school at Edgely, Ontario, where he was remembered as a stern disciplinarian. The next fall he enrolled at the University of Toronto, where he shocked an occasional professor and received indifferent marks. In 1911, after two years of college, he got a job teaching English and rudimentary academic skills to immigrants working in the lumber camps. When the logging season was over, he got a job as a reporter on the Winnipeg Telegram. The next year he was back at the University, where he was admitted to the School of Medicine. His marks improved. When Great Britain entered the World War, Canada and Bethune more or less followed automatically, Bethune to join the Number Two Field Ambulance Army Medical Corps. In April, 1915, he was hit by shrapnel in the left leg and sent to convalesce in Cambridge, England. With the demand for medical doctors incessant, he was asked to return to Toronto to complete his studies. He graduated in December, 1916. A fellow student remembered him clearly:

"... I would class him as a good student. He always dressed well and he always seemed to have other things on his mind besides medicine. We used to think he had quite strong socialist ideas and no doubt many of them were well-founded. He was always very interested in the need of the common man. . . . We always felt he was a bit of an enigma."

Bethune, though a determined champion of the oppressed, accepted master-servant relationships with apparent ease. Ho Tzu-hsin, standing rear, was his personal servant. Bethune taught him—with much difficulty—to cook eggs and when he succeeded, Bethune celebrated by having this picture taken. The English-language magazine Ho is holding was his reward from Bethune.

The classmate was a good diagnostician—he saw the early marks of the fully developed Bethune. He would remain a student and become a teacher; he would become, and remain for years, a dandified dresser; he would become first a socialist, then a communist; he would remain committed to the common man and he would remain an enigma. In 1920 he met beautiful, insecure Frances Penney in London. They married