

RECALLING DOCTOR BETHUNE

The Scalpel, The Sword

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The name of Norman Bethune, the Canadian Physician who went to China to join the war of resistance against Japanese fascism and finally breathed his last there, received world-wide fame owing to the glowing tribute paid to him by Mao Ze-dong, the foremost leader of the Chinese Revolution. His decision to go to China was the culmination of a life-process that had many vicissitudes, and hence is a subject of immense interest. In 1952, a brilliantly written biography of Dr Bethune was published by the Monthly Review Press, and the book went through a second edition in 1973. It is heartening to see an Indian *edition brought out by Aakar Books at a modest price.

The story of Bethune's development as a great physician and humanist reads like a fiction. His parents, Malcom and Elizabeth, were preachers, and Norman was their second child and first son. Bethune had a venturesome spirit from childhood, and displayed the urge to become a surgeon. He worked in various capacities—as a waiter, as a reporter and even as a lumberjack and so on—in order to earn money for paying his tuition fees. But shortly before the completion of his medical studies, the First World War broke out and Bethune went to France to work as a stretcher-bearer, and had his left thigh ripped to the bone at Ypres. After being invalided home, he took his M D Degree in Toronto and again joined the war, serving the British Navy and the Canadian flying corpse, after which settled for the time being in London, and worked at two hospitals. The biographers sum up his style of living in London in this way:

'There was time for the hospital and time for study and time for all-night binges as the young doctor wallowed in the uninhibited atmosphere of postwar London. The idea was to experience everything. The war had taught him that life was cheap and death came fast and there was little time for man to taste everything that life offered'. While in London, he met Frances Campbell Penny, a woman twelve years younger, and they got married (ironically they were subsequently separated, at Bethune's prodding, to be remarried still later, and this time too Bethune put forward the proposal). The couple shifted to Detroit, Michigan, then a rapidly growing commercial and industrial city. There Bethune learnt a lesson that was never lost on him; 'those who most needed his services were those who could least afford to pay for them'. At the same time, he excelled as a professional surgeon and built up a lucrative practice. Overwork got the better of him, and finally he took refuge in the Trudeau Sanatorium at Sarmac Lake, New York, patiently waiting for death. But a book titled "The Surgery of Pulmonary Tuberculosis" made him feel that he could be saved only if he was operated upon in a therapeutic procedure. When he insisted on his being treated in this way, the doctors reluctantly agreed, and the effect was 'quick and dramatic'.

Sometime after this spectacular recovery, Bethune joined the Royal Victoria Hospital of Montreal as a surgeon and teacher. Here he developed his innovating faculties, and devised new instruments. The famous Philadelphia firm of Pilling and Sons took the exclusive right to manufacture and distribute these instruments. As the biographers put it, "For Bethune it was to presage a new eminence. The pupil had already established himself as a master in his own right. Henceforth, wherever medical men warred against tuberculosis across the continent, the instruments bearing his name were among their indispensable weapons."

But the master surgeon could not remain content with this reputation only. These were portentous years. The great depression was rocking the whole of North America. Bethune, in the spring of 1933 left Montreal in order to take temporary charge of the thoracic surgery

department of the Herman Keifer Hospital of Detroit and after the expiry of the tenure, undertook trips across the states, demonstrating his surgical techniques. By then, his second marriage with Francis had broke down. The depression was so severe that even a surgeon of Bethune's stature had to struggle hard to find a job after his return to Montreal, before being appointed head of the chest surgery department at Sacre Coeur hospital. But Bethune felt hardly satisfied with what he was witnessing. 'In the world at large he noted a disturbing contradiction. Millions were without clothes and the United States ploughed under its cotton fields. Tens of millions were hungry, but Canada burned its wheat. On street corners, men begged a nickel for a cup of coffee, but Brazil dumped its coffee into the ocean. In Montreal's working-class districts the children were bowlegged with rickets, but oranges from the South were destroyed by the carload.' Bethune had become an immensely successful T B surgeon, but he felt that they, as physicians, could 'do but little to change the external environmental forces which pre-dispose to infection and re-infection'. He witnessed the brutal assault of the police on the unemployed demanding jobs, and the very next day, going to the dingy office of the Montreal Unemployed Association, offered to treat free of charge any person they would send to him. 'He began to mingle with men who had forgotten the sensation of a decent meal. He went to their homes, stood among them as "black committees" prevented their evictions for non-payment of rent, accompanied them to meetings where orators spoke movingly of the plight of the jobless, met their leaders, made friends with people who called themselves communists, CCFers, socialists, liberals'. They accepted him with great warmth. Then he went to the Soviet Union to attend an International Physiological Congress, met Pavlov and studied his methods and visited Russian hospitals and sanatoriums. He found that the Soviet Union, a country that earlier had to spend about a decade in rebuilding the country's ruined economy, had been able to reduce the incidence of tuberculosis by more than fifty percent. He was so impressed by the system of treatment in the Soviet Union that back home, he went on speaking in seminars and conferences on the Soviet achievements, their magnitude and their secret. At a meeting, he told the audience, "Creation is not and has never been a genteel gesture. It is rude, violent and revolutionary. But to those courageous hearts who believe in the unlimited future of man, in the divine destiny which lies in his own hand to make of what he will-to these Russia presents today the most exciting spectacle of the revolutionary, emergent and heroic spirit of man which has appeared on this earth since the Reformation. To deny this is to deny our faith in men- and that is the unforgivable sin, the final apostasy." Bethune's next step was to join the Communist Party, although his membership was kept a secret. He spent much time in preparing plans for T B patients that would provide them with an environment 'offering them the maximum health, the opportunity to live normally and to earn a livelihood in trades making no excessive demands on them.' Besides, he emphasized with concrete arguments, sponsorship of such a programme would in the long run be less costly than repairing the damage wrought by the spread of tuberculosis. During this period, his residence was once ransacked by local fascists in his absence.

His mind was tormented by the civil war in Spain, and he was at the same time haunted by the sight of a dying girl-child lying at the hospital. The biographers have movingly described the state of Bethune's mind, "He got to his feet and paced about the office. One year ago the child might have been cured easily. Now it was a toss of the coin. If he operated and she died, somebody would say he killed her. But who would have killed her really? ...he was handed the alternative of letting her die or perhaps killing her on the operating table." But that 'perhaps' did not turn into 'actually', thanks to Bethune's miraculous surgical skill. After the successful operation, he wrote to Marion Scot, his co-worker at the Children's art school, of which he was the founder. 'My child is well... the first time this has been done in a child of ten in Canada... Isn't it nice?'

Then Bethune, at the request of the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, Toronto decided, after much deliberation-because there were much stakes and personal considerations involved, to head a medical unit to be sent to Spain. There his main

contribution was to organize a *mobile* blood transfusion unit that would gather blood from volunteers in the cities, store it, make it available to casualty stations and field hospitals, and above all, provide transfusions at the front while the battle was in progress.' This book gives a graphic and moving picture of the battle, its strength and weaknesses, and Bethune's work, and the risks he underwent while doing his duty. At the same time the book exposes the nefarious role played by the governments of the USA, Britain and France, who embargoed the Popular Front Government and thus acted as indirect collaborators of fascists. He not only set up the blood transfusion unit, but also set up villages for war orphans. And then, at the request of Carlos Contreas, the leader of the Fifth Regiment of the loyalist forces, came back to Canada in order to act as the spokesman of bleeding Spain in North America. He received unexpected response from the people, although not from the governments, in his lecture tours, but by then his mind turned towards China. The Chinese people were heroically resisting Japanese aggression, and Bethune decided to go there to employ his skill and energy in service of the war of resistance. He reached Hong Kong and then flew to Hankow, from which place he left for north China, braving the fear of Japanese bombardment all the time. He reached Yen-an and met Mao Ze-dong, who was astonished at Bethune's pronouncement that at least seventy-five percent of those who were dying of wounds received in the battle could be saved only if there was a properly equipped mobile operating unit functioning near the front. On Mao's instruction, he organized the unit with equipment and supplies brought from Sian. He also organized the first Volunteer Blood Donor Corpse in China, and set up more base hospitals. He continued his work and his proneness to share all the hardships that the people were going through earned him the respect of everybody wherever he went. Finally, he decided to go to the United States in order to get assistance for setting up a new medical school for training local persons of the northern border region where the battle with Japan was at its fiercest. But the tour had to be put off because the mobile operating unit had to go to the front for fighting. There, Bethune got a cut while performing an operation without rubber gloves at a time when the Japanese troops and puppet forces had almost reached the spot of his operation theater. He, along with his aides, left the place just in the nick of time, but the infection caused by the cut finally led to his demise.

This short summary is only a partial reflection of the events narrated in the book written in graphic details, the information for which was laboriously gleaned from various sources. What is very much interesting is the way in which Bethune, the epicure and bon vivant, was transformed into a great fighter for the cause of emancipation of mankind from bondage. The more one goes through this brilliantly written book, the more one must feel that it is as interesting as a great fiction. The book was published by the Monthly Review Press in 1952 and again in 1973 with an introduction by Madame Sun Yat-Sen (the introduction is retained in this edition too); but the expiry of about six decades does not lessen its relevance, because global imperialism and its necessary instrument—global terrorism, continue to exist, and the battle against them has not lost its usefulness. Nearer home another Doctor, Dr Binayak Sen is languishing in jail for serving the poor and needy. □□□

*THE SCALPEL, THE SWORD—The Story of Doctor Norman Bethune.

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