

# The Bethune myth: Man and movie

BY WYNDHAM WISE

*"I come of a race of men violent, unstable, of passionate convictions and wrong-headedness, intolerant yet with it all a vision of truth and a drive to carry them on to it even though it leads to their destruction."*

Norman Bethune to a friend.

*"He loved the smell of danger."*

Hazen Sise, who served with Bethune in Spain.

*"He died as he lived, lonely and in combat."*

Roderick Stewart, author of *Bethune*.

*"We need to be reminded that there are men, heroic in stature and action, who bring hope and inspiration to the rest of us. Bethune was such a man."*

Ted Allan, *The Scalpel, The Sword*.



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**D**r. Henry Norman Bethune was a man of passionate contradictions. A *bon vivant* with the soul of a martyr; a pragmatic idealist; a communist who hated any sort of authority; a revolutionary hero to over a billion people, yet considered by some to be little better than an arrogant, womanizing bully; a doctor who felt most alive during the heat of battle; a genuine Renaissance man who died a hero's death. He was, in varying degrees, one of North America's best chest surgeons, as well as a painter, poet, soldier, critic, social worker, teacher, inventor, writer, and is one of the most revered men in modern China.

Bethune's story has been told and retold in books, plays, poems, tributes, an NFB documentary, a CBC drama, and a feature-length Chinese film. Bethune, a fourth-generation Canadian descended from a line of doctors

and ministers, was born in Gravenhurst, Ontario on March 3, 1890. He went to the University of Toronto to study medicine then fought, and was wounded, at the battle of Ypres during the First World War. After the war, he married a Scottish socialite, Frances Campbell Penny, and set up a practice in Detroit. There he contracted tuberculosis and was forced to spend time in a sanatorium in up-state New York where he cured himself with radical surgery. During this period, Frances left him for the first time.

Bethune went on to become one of the most famous, and most controversial chest surgeons in North America, first at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, then as the chief surgeon at the Sacré Coeur Hospital in Cartierville. He married Frances again in Montreal, but they soon would be divorced for a second time. He continued to stay in touch with her until the end.

## TO LIVE AND DIE IN CHINA

Bethune's fight against tuberculosis, and its evident link to poverty (he claimed there were two types of T. B.: the rich man's T. B. and the

poor man's T. B. — the rich man lived and the poor man died), led him to become a crusader for socialized medicine. The doctor was converted to communism in 1935 after a seminal trip to Russia convinced him of the superiority of the USSR's public health system. Restless and devotedly anti-fascist, Bethune joined the "lost generation" in the fight against Franco in Spain. He established a mobile blood service and pioneered techniques in refrigerating blood for use on the battlefield. He performed the first blood transfusion during battle conditions. He courted danger and drank heavily. After six months he was sent home to engage in a cross-Canada speaking tour to raise money for the Spanish Republicans.

Bored with inaction, Bethune soon turned his sights on China and its war against the Japanese. After volunteering to serve with Mao's famous Eighth Route Army, he earned the everlasting love of the Chinese people by giving the wounded his own blood when it was needed. He built hospitals where none had existed; he trained peasants to be doctors; he

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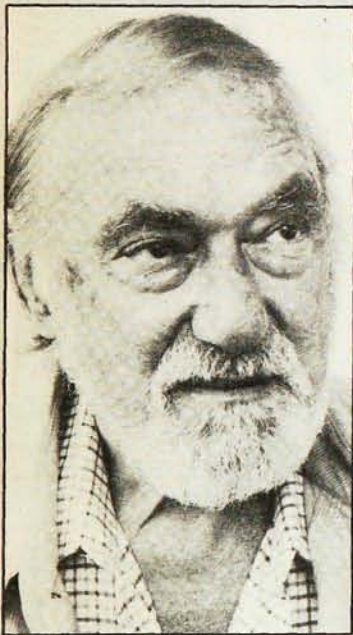


## Ted Allan's long march: An interview with Bethune's screenwriter

BY WYNDHAM WISE

**B**orn January 25, 1916 in Montreal, Ted Allan has written numerous dramas and comedies for television (CBC, BBC, ITV) and many radio plays (CBC, BBC). His stage plays include *The Money Makers*, *The Secret of the World*, *Love Streams* and *Lies My Father Told Me*. Allan co-wrote the screenplay of *Love Streams* for John Cassavettes in 1983, and his screenplay for *Lies My Father Told Me*, directed by Jan Kadar, won a Golden Globe Award from the Hollywood Critics and an Oscar nomination in 1976.

In 1952 he wrote *The Scalpel, The Sword - The Story of Doctor Norman Bethune* with Sydney Gordon. The book has sold over 2 million copies in 19 different languages. He has spent 47 years waiting for a feature film to be made on the life of Dr. Bethune, whom Allan calls Canada's greatest hero. He is still waiting, but very soon his dream will be realized.



**Cinema Canada:** How did you meet Bethune?

**Ted Allan:** In 1935 I was the Montreal correspondent for *The Daily Clarion*. I had a short story published in the now defunct *New Frontier*. It was about my street. (Later this would become the basis for *Lies My Father Told Me*.) Bethune was known to me then as a sort of star. Not only was he a leading thoracic surgeon, but he was very verbal about the lack of medical facilities for the unemployed. He organized medical clinics to give unemployed people medical attention. I had heard him speak and I was very impressed with him. I got a phone call one night. "Hello this is Norman Bethune." At first I thought it was a joke. "I read your short story in *The New Frontier* and loved it. I'm having a party Saturday night. Could you come?" His friends were some of the leading people of the country. Writers, painters, poets, sculptors, etc.

He became my surrogate daddy and I hero worshipped him until Spain.

**Cinema Canada:** What happened in Spain?

**Ted Allan:** Here is the story about me going to Spain because there are some controversies about me and different anecdotes and reports. I was supposed to go there for *The Daily Clarion* as their correspondent. But, unbeknownst to me, the editor had made other arrangements with someone who was going on her own, paying her own way to write articles. I then said to hell with it, I'm going anyway, and went as a volunteer in the International Brigade. This was February 1937. I had just passed my 21st birthday.

I joined a fighting unit. However, a week before our arrival, three leading writers had been killed. When it was discovered by the powers that be in the International Brigade that I was a writer, I was immediately transferred out of the fighting unit and sent to Madrid for the International Brigade newspaper to write and to investigate rumours about problems in the Spanish-Canadian Blood Transfusion Unit. By then I had heard terrible stories that Bethune was drunk, losing his temper, and having a terrible time with some of the Spanish doctors who resented the fact that a foreigner, and a surgeon at that, was head of a blood transfusion unit.

The truth of the matter was that he had organized it. He had dreamed it up. He is the one who realized that if you wait until you give a wounded soldier a blood transfusion in hospital he would be dead. He was the first man in history to perform a blood transfusion right on the battlefield. But there was terrible, terrible tension. Bethune was having a terrible time because he could not effect any discipline. It was a political issue. That's why he drank so heavily there. He had been, from what I can gather, a heavy drinker but he never seemed to have a drinking problem until Spain. But in Spain he got so drunk and so violent that he smashed windows and furniture in his anger and his frustration. So my great hero worship of him

wrote instruction manuals; he worked non-stop to bring health and hygiene to the people as well as the army; and he aged 20 years in less than two. During one period he performed 115 operations in 69 non-stop hours, with only 10-minute breaks towards the end. He cut himself while operating under Japanese fire and finally succumbed to the primitive conditions, exhaustion, and blood poisoning. He died November 13, 1939, in a remote village in the heart of China's beautiful Wutai mountains, home (in his early years) to another foreigner who had a profound influence on the Chinese people, Buddha.

Official Canada long chose to ignore Bethune's heroic actions. Canada was not at war with Spain in 1936, and the war in China was seen as insignificant in light of Hitler's ambitions in Europe. However, in China, the doctor's heroic stature took on mythic proportions. Weeks after his death, Mao wrote *In Memory of Norman Bethune*, a short piece on the virtues of internationalism and selfless behaviour as personified by Bethune. Mao concluded that "every Communist must learn the true communist spirit from Comrade Bethune." *In Memory* became required reading for a whole generation of Chinese during the Cultural Revolution of the sixties and Bethune's fame became international.

When Canada finally restored diplomatic ties with the Chinese in 1970, the first request the newly arrived Chinese ambassador made from official Ottawa was a visit to Bethune's birthplace. It is said that the Ottawa officials didn't have a clue where it was. A year later, Canada and China concluded their first multi-million dollar wheat deal, and Bethune was designated a Canadian "of national historic significance." His house in Gravenhurst was turned into a museum. Happily, this cynical, belated recognition of Canada's greatest wartime hero did not go unnoticed. A Toronto newspaper noted in an editorial at the time, "A few Canadians, not blinded by the fact that he was a Communist, have long been aware that Dr. Bethune was an idealist who practiced his ideals, an exceptionally dedicated and courageous man."

### A LIFELONG OBSESSION

One of those few Canadians has been struggling to get a feature film made about the life of Dr. Norman Bethune almost from the time he died in China. Ted Allan (see accompanying interview) knew Bethune from his Montreal days and also served in Spain at the same time the doctor was there. In 1942 Allan wrote a 185-page biography which he sold to 20th Century Fox. However, in the late forties the political climate had changed in Hollywood, and the project was dropped by the studio, although it continued to hold onto the rights. By 1952 Allan had completed his biography of Bethune, *The Scalpel, The Sword*, with Sydney Gordon,

which went on to become an international best-seller. The film project was to remain dormant for almost 30 years.

In the meantime, in 1963, Donald Brittain co-wrote and directed *Bethune-héros de notre temps* for the National Film Board, produced by John Kemeny. Although never officially approved by the NFB because of its political implications, the film remains a sympathetic and accurate portrait of the man, with an insightful commentary written by Brittain and read by Lister Sinclair. In the early seventies Hollywood again expressed interest, and a little-known producer, Edward Lewis, optioned *The Scalpel, The Sword*, from Allan and Gordon. The writers were not talking to each other at the time, and Gordon had moved to East Berlin. After the producer commissioned two scripts for the price of one, Allan wrote his, but Gordon didn't. This led to a complicated wrangle over the rights to the screenplay. To make matters even more complicated, veteran Hollywood producer and director Otto Preminger picked up the option on Gordon's unwritten screenplay and announced that he was going into production. However, Allan refused to sell his half of the rights. "I didn't want Preminger to direct it," Allan said. "I'm not saying he was a bad director, I just didn't think he was the right director for Bethune."

### THE KEMENY CONNECTION

As a precautionary measure, when Allan was commissioned by Lewis, he bought back the rights to his 185-page biography from 20th Century Fox. John Kemeny, now an independent producer with the success of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* under his belt, picked up the option on this biography and Allan wrote another screenplay, this time adding material about his personal friendship with Bethune and Frances. Kemeny ran with the option for nearly 10 years, first with Columbia Pictures, then with Warner Bros. Potential deals came together and potential deals fell apart; the one constant factor was Allan's determination to have the film made. He wrote countless drafts (the total to date is over 40), and at first Norman Jewison, then Ted Kotcheff was named as the film's director. Columbia insisted on a big-name actor, like Jack Nicholson or Robert Redford, to star, and so did Warner Bros. The project blew hot and cold, but it didn't get made.

Kemeny's most sustained effort came in 1980, when he and his partner in International Cinema Corporation, veteran Quebec producer Denis Héroux, announced plans in June for a \$25 million epic, *Bethune-The Long March*. ICC put in place a nationwide public offering with the participation of the CFDC (pre-Telefilm), the Institut Québécois du Cinéma, Famous Players and European co-producing partners, based on the Allan script with Ted Kotcheff directing. Kemeny and Kotcheff went to China to sign a deal with the China Film Coproduction





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**Doing it his way: actor Donald Sutherland brought his own conception of Norman Bethune to Ted Allan's script.**

Corporation and the August 1st Film Studios. Production was scheduled to start in February of 1981. But, by then the timing was all wrong. The tax shelter financing bubble burst in 1980. Kemeny let the option run out, and the rights reverted back to Allan.

**ENTER SUTHERLAND**

Actor Donald Sutherland is another Canadian with an abiding passion for Bethune. During the Vietnam war years, he travelled with Jane Fonda (then his lover) doing a *Free the Army Tour*, a lighthearted anti-war revue. During the tour, the actor came across the writings of Bethune, in

particular *Wounds*, an anti-fascist piece the doctor had written shortly before his death. Sutherland made an extensive study of Bethune and played him in an episode of CBC's *Witness to Yesterday*. He also played the legendary surgeon in a 1977 CBC drama with Kate Nelligan co-starring as Frances. Made for \$400,000, *Bethune* was shot on a tacky set with very poor production values. However, it had already become apparent that Bethune was the role Sutherland was born to play. (He also bears an uncanny physical resemblance to the good doctor.)

Sutherland's passion for Bethune quickly

descended into terrible dissolution because I was bit of a moralistic young Communist at the time, and he was not behaving the way a Communist hero should behave. He had feet of clay and it absolutely devastated me.

So I sent a report to the party at the time, who then sent someone to investigate the situation. William Kashtan went to Spain, and he decided that he (Bethune) could be much more effective raising money and talking about Spain. I stayed on until September. Different versions have Mr. Kashtan bringing me back as well. I was appointed in April the correspondent for *The Daily Clarion*. I had been writing for the left wing press in New York, and they were printing my dispatches anyway, so I did become *The Daily Clarion* correspondent, but I didn't go as *The Daily Clarion* correspondent. That's the story.

**Cinema Canada:** *In Martin Knelman's article about you in Saturday Night, he claims that you and Bethune fought the last time you saw each other, and this has led to years of bitterness and regret and similar disagreements with Donald Sutherland.*

**Ted Allan:** That's Knelman trying to create some drama. He's trying to approximate my relationship with Bethune with my relationship with Sutherland. That's nonsense, such nonsense. I loved Bethune and my ambivalence about him is the ambivalence of a son toward a father. I loved him, and he disappointed me, and I loved him again. This has nothing to do with my relationship with Sutherland, which we'll get to in a minute. Yes, I wanted him to forgive me. By then I had a tank hit me during my stay in Spain, and he saved my foot. He used to bandage and clean it every day, but he was hurt by the attitude I had taken, by the fact that I had written this report.

It wasn't until after his death and in getting material from Madame Sun Yat-Sen, and his letters, and his notes, and the stories about him, that I realized that he had become transformed in China. So that is the story of the young man who hero-worships, becomes disillusioned, and learns to love again. That's the truth. How anybody could take that and say they parallel my disagreements with Sutherland is beyond me. I found it offensive.

I had never written anything about me and Bethune until I wrote this screenplay. There is a character more or less based on me in the screenplay.

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you feel like a guardian of Bethune's memory?*

**Ted Allan:** Once I found out what this man had achieved, the effect this man had on the Chinese people... he had helped transform them, and they had transformed him. As a result of his example, they used to attack the Japanese... Because they knew he was there to help they began to feel invincible... I mean this is an incredible story. This was when the revolution

was at its purest. They transformed him. I felt it was necessary to tell the whole story. I believe he was the greatest Canadian that ever lived. Certainly the most exciting. My son is named after him.

There happens to be a true story about his drinking over there. He drank very heavily the first six months, but this was before he got to the Wutai Mountains. Once he got to the Wutai and was plunged into these incredible conditions - unsanitary hospitals, inadequate post-operative care, no trained surgeons, working around the clock - he stopped drinking. As a matter of fact, there is a story that he was hoarding - I don't think it is in the movie - a half a bottle of whiskey, and when they ran out of anaesthetic, he said give them the whiskey.

And another thing, Dr. Robert McClure, he was the head of the United Church Missions in China, gave Bethune sulphur drugs. Bethune could have saved his life when he was infected with blood poisoning, but Bethune gave these sulphur drugs to the wounded. That's when McClure said this man is a saint. He was angry and disgusted with his drinking habits, but when he found that he gave his sulphur drugs to the wounded... So, yes the story is that he still drank, but he overcame an incredible problem, which I think is one of the great parts of the story.

**Cinema Canada:** *Some people say Bethune had the soul of a martyr, that he courted death deliberately. He constantly went back to the front against the expressed wishes of the Chinese command.*

**Ted Allan:** He was trying to come back to Canada. He hoped to be back in Canada in a few months. (This was in October of 1939.) His teeth were bad, his eyesight was bad, his hearing was bad. He felt a certain guilt, and he knew how desperately he was needed. You could say that it is suicidal if you wish. You could say it was martyr-like if you wish. Feeling that he was going to be gone soon, he wanted to do the rounds of the hospitals. He wanted to be there. When I interviewed his mother after his death, she said, "Norman died a Christian martyr." And I said he was a Communist. She said pay no attention to that: "He was a true Christian and he died the way I wanted to die." She was a missionary. It is interesting that he died the way his mother wanted him to die and if I ever write another book about him, I will make that point. I didn't in *The Scalpel*, *The Sword* and I didn't in the film.

**Cinema Canada:** *What about the making of the film?*

**Ted Allan:** (With Filmline) I put a clause in the contract that very few writers have added. No line could be changed and no other writer could be hired without my permission. It became a joke, but I was so happy I was now going to have a say in any changes made in the script.

I left (China) after a few months because it



became evident to me that my presence was not going to help the movie and that I could be much more effective away. The disagreements between me and Sutherland and me and Borsos are not personal. They are the problems every screenwriter has. In this day and age, whoever is the star, if it's the director, he determines what's in the script; if it's an actor, he determines what's in the script. I tried to fight that. ACTRA is trying to fight that. It's a big fight. It's not a personal issue. DeNiro brings his own writer. Dustin Hoffman brings his own writer. I was brought on by actors on other scripts.

But because this was a life's work, and not just a movie, because it was Bethune, I thought I would protect my screenplay. The Chinese made the deal partly because the timing was right, partly because they accepted my screenplay. Sutherland had many objections to various scenes. So did Borsos. Instead of the three of us being able to work them out, it got to the point where, because Sutherland was the star, scenes were being done as he wanted them. Eventually, I think it's going to be basically Borsos' picture.

There was no question that Sutherland had his concept of what the character should be. The fact that I knew Bethune as well as I did, meant he listened to a certain extent, but he went his way. Remember, he had written his own script, and he had played Bethune, so he was obsessed also with his concept of Bethune. Here you had the writer with his obsession; you have him with his.

It is interesting to me that during the making of *Bethune*, Sutherland did two other movies. I think it is unheard of in the history of movie-making. Might that not be some motive for such discussion about the script needing work, and rewrites, and that there would be more and more delays. The producers got the blame for all the delays. I wonder if that is true.

Sutherland didn't think Bethune had changed all that much in China. Well, there isn't any movie if Bethune didn't change. So if you had his vision you had no movie. Happily, the director is trying to cope with that. You can't have a drama unless there is character conflict and character development.

Is it the screenplay I wrote? More or less. I would say that most of China is the screenplay I wrote. Most of Montreal and Spain is based on the screenplay I wrote as it was worked out by Borsos and Sutherland. Is this an unusual situation? No, it is typical of making movies. The other thing is there is a difference of opinion between Sutherland and myself about what constitutes structure. I think the man is brilliant as an actor. I think the man is also brilliant with a scene. I do not think he has a concept of dramatic structure, of how one scene leads into another.

Now, if the movie works, I forgive him

everything. If it doesn't work, I will find it difficult to forgive him. On the basis of what I have already seen it is going to work enough. I think the movie is going to be a movie that Canadians are going to like, and will be worthy of Bethune.

**Cinema Canada:** Is it a relief for you to see this done now?

**Ted Allan:** Yes, it is a relief to the extent that it isn't the movie that I dreamed, but, by God, it will at least be a monument there for Bethune. It's the longest movie being made in the history of movies. A world record.

**Cinema Canada:** What are you currently working on?

**Ted Allan:** I'm not working on Beaverbrook anymore because there was an amicable difference. I decided I could not do more than two hours and the producers insisted on four. I could do two good hours on Beaverbrook, because he's worth a feature-length film, but I could not get four hours out of it. So I gave that up.

Right now I am writing a film for Gena Rowlands, the widow of John Cassavettes. She did a play of mine in Los Angeles four years ago called *The Third Day Comes* that John directed, and I am now doing that as a screenplay for her. I'm hoping to have it ready in about another month and set it up hopefully before the year is over. I have other screenplays, *Love Is a Long Shot* and *The Money Makers*.

I want to direct *The Money Makers* myself. It's the story about Canadians in Hollywood during the McCarthy period, during the blacklisting and the witchhunts. It's a comedy, how the Canadians are trying to be as ruthless and efficient as the Americans and they can't quite make it. It's a play about the fifties, the frightened fifties I call them.

I have a house in Stratford, a place in Montreal and in Toronto. I enjoy being among Canadians now. I like living with people who do not have a superpower mentality. It pleases me. I like being among my own people.

I was officially asked by the Immigration Department and the FBI to leave the United States. That was 40 years ago. Because of my former left wing affiliations I couldn't do movies. The magazines wouldn't publish me, so I came back home in 1949. And did very well here, in radio mostly until 1954 when one of my plays, which had been done on radio and started for rehearsal on television, was vetoed by an American ad agency. That convinced me I should not stay in my own country, and I went to London. I was there for 28 years.

Now I don't think I will be censored in my own country. If *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* is very successful, I will be lionized, if not, it's not going to change much for me. I just hope that when it is finished it will be worthy of him, that's all.

What else can I say? It's been a long march. ●



Director Phillip Borsos and his Chinese counterpart, Wang Xigang communicate via interpreter Emily Lui.

turned into an obsession almost as deep as Allan's. He purchased the rights to a second Bethune biography by Roderick Stewart (which is based more on the facts of the doctor's life, as opposed to Allan's biography, which contains a broad streak of hero worship). Sutherland's idea was grandiose, a \$40 million production with Gillo Pontecorvo (*The Battle of Algiers*) directing. The actor, too, spent a great deal of money on the script, but like the Kemeny-Héroux project, Sutherland's somehow just didn't work out. However, by now Sutherland was convinced that only he could play the communist doctor from Gravenhurst. He told Ron Base of the *Toronto Star*, "I always expected to do it. Absolutely. It is going to happen." And it did, but not without many more years of struggle and false starts.

The final piece in the puzzle of how to produce a multi-million dollar Canadian epic that would remain true to Bethune's ideals (after all, as a card-carrying member of the party, he truly hated the capitalist ruling class) was provided by Ted Allan's daughter, Julie. In 1984, while working for Filmline International, she introduced her father to producers Nicolas Clermont and Pieter Kroonenburg. Kroonenburg, who was born in the Netherlands and came to Canada in 1979, was the associate producer on Don Shebib's *Heartaches* in 1980 and a successful producer of a number of films including Paul Lynch's *Cross Country*, Tony Richardson's *The Hotel New Hampshire* and executive producer on Jean-Claude Lord's *Toby McTeague*. Clermont had come from France in 1968 and worked on a number of projects, including a script with Robert Altman which was never made, until he joined forces with Kroonenburg in 1984. Together they produced *Toby McTeague*, *Eternal Evil*, and *Wild Thing*, written by John Sayles.

The pair picked up the lapsed option on Allan's screenplay and proceeded down the

same path that Kemeny and Héroux had travelled almost 10 years previously. Kroonenburg told Base of the *Toronto Star*, "I was very naive. I had absolutely no idea of the history this film had. When I did find out the history, everyone tried to discourage me from making the film." But refusing to be discouraged, Kroonenburg and Clermont were able to secure the interest of the Chinese on the basis of Allan's revised script. "The Chinese delegation came here in February of 1986," Clermont recalls, "and after making the rounds of Telefilm and the CBC, the DOC, and meeting with everybody, they confirmed they were interested to do it. We reciprocated with a trip to China and we started to work on the budget and costs." As with the ICC deal in 1980, China's interests were represented by the China Coproduction Corporation and the Beijing-based August 1st Studios.

This time the Chinese were not only prepared to cooperate, but were willing to co-produce and make a huge investment of services and facilities, offering Filmline studios, crews, film labs (they would prove to be unusable due to the dirt in the Beijing water system and the film had to be sent to Vancouver to be processed), and thousands of troops as extras. The August 1st Studio is run by the People's Liberation Army (the direct descendent of Mao's Eighth Route Army), so it had unfettered access to the government and the remote locations needed for the story. This proved to be the key to getting the film made, but also one of the major difficulties of shooting in China.

#### AFTER 45 YEARS, THE SHOOT BEGINS

Finally, after 45 years, things were beginning to take shape with Allan's script and Sutherland as Bethune, at half his usual salary. Kotcheff, slated to direct, backed out at the last minute, turning down the deal offered by Filmline. "He



knew all along the amount of money we had for a director, which wasn't his usual Hollywood salary," said Clermont. "He never really believed that this would happen and the day it became a reality he said, 'well guys I can't do this for such a small amount of money.'" Kroonenburg and Clermont quickly turned around and hired Phillip Borsos (*The Grey Fox, One Magic Christmas*) in January of 1987.

In February, then federal Communications Minister Flora MacDonald was in Beijing to sign the official film and television co-production treaty between Canada and China. Clermont was there at the ceremony and the crew immediately went into three months of pre-production at the August 1st Studios. Allan joined them to continue work on the script, but it was becoming evident that his vision of Bethune was not the same as Sutherland's.

Allan saw Bethune as a great, but flawed man who became transformed by his experiences in China. Sutherland tended towards the notion that Bethune became "pure" in China and had carried that seed of purity with him throughout his life. Disputes about Bethune's character centred around such issues as his drinking. Allan had written that Bethune arrived in China drunk and disheveled. Sutherland played the doctor sober and upright. Borsos tended towards the Sutherland version, but he had troubles of his own with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Xigang, an actor (China's version of Clint Eastwood) turned producer-director (also the vice-president of the August 1st Studios), who was appointed to oversee the making of the Chinese portion of the film.

The Chinese shoot lasted 17 weeks, from April 15th to August 4th. After a week in Beijing, the shoot moved to the remote village of Pingyao for two weeks, then to Yenan, former headquarters of Mao's army during his fight with the Japanese. After spending nearly a month there, the filmmakers headed to the Yellow River for a few days, and finally to the Wutai mountains where Bethune fought and died.

Trouble began when the crew, approximately 35 Canadians (and some Brits) and 120 Chinese, moved from Beijing, where the Canadians had been staying in western-style hotels, to Pingyao, a 12-hour train ride southwest of Beijing. Accommodations were dreadful, the food awful, and at one point the crew was without bottled water (the local stuff was undrinkable) for two days.

Word got back to the Toronto press that things were going badly and the *Toronto Star* sent Ron Base to investigate. His three-part series on the production was given prominent play in the *Star*, with headlines about the "disaster" on a "joyless" set. "He picked up on things that were going to sensationalize the story," said Clermont, "like Bethune crew eats dog food. That was a joke that was made up while he was sitting at the table. It was ludicrous."

However, it was evident that Kroonenburg



Donald Sutherland playing Dr. Norman Bethune, during the China portion of the shoot with actors from the August 1st studio.

and Clermont were not prepared for dreadful conditions in Pingyao that got only marginally better in Yenan. At least there the cast and crew had a hotel with running water and toilets. A large part of the problem was trying to work side by side with the Chinese, with the inherent problems of language and culture. Simply, the Chinese did things differently, and were obviously used to the working conditions. The Canadian-English crew were not, and what began as an exercise in Chinese-Canadian cooperation, turned into a 17-week struggle to survive the experience. All the westerners eventually succumbed to the Chinese "sickness." Some left, others actually enjoyed the experience. All were very glad when it was over.

"I wish we had another two months of preparation," recalls Clermont. "We had to start by a certain date or the Chinese were going to pull out. Because of the delays in financing, they became to doubt whether this production would ever happen. At one point they said you must start by mid-April or we are out. We were not as prepared as we should have been."

In addition to the dreadful local food (things did get better with the arrival of a western-style catering truck), the accommodation, the language, the cultural and logistical problems (sometimes the equipment didn't arrive until a week after the crew did, while phone calls involved a 12-hour drive over rough roads), creative differences continued throughout the shoot. Borsos had continual arguments with his Chinese counterpart Wang over how to play a certain scene. Borsos strove for a realistic

portrayal while Wang was there to preserve the official party line.

### "I THOUGHT I WAS GOING INSANE"

Bob McKeown's *Strangers in a Strange Land*, a documentary about the Chinese portion of the shoot commissioned by the CBC and initially approved of by the producers, shows Borsos struggling to get the doctors' clothes covered with blood and filth during a battle scene, while the Chinese insisted that despite the primitive conditions the doctors and nurses should be scrubbed and clean. On a number of occasions, Borsos loses his temper in the sheer frustration of trying to get a scene right. "I thought I was going insane," Borsos told James Rusk of the *Globe and Mail* who joined the shoot in the Wutai. "It didn't seem that what I set out to accomplish was being accomplished at all. It's a wonderful country, but its system is completely alien to my sensibility." (Neither Borsos, Wang nor Sutherland would comment on the making of the film for this article.)

To add to the immense struggle of physically getting the film made, the script kept changing from day to day. Allan had negotiated the right to approve any changes, but after he left China, two other writers were brought over, one from each of the competing factions. American Don Miller had Allan's blessing to make dialogue changes if necessary and another American, Dennis Miller, was hired by Sutherland to do the same. As *Strangers in a Strange Land* makes clear, there were times when the production came to a halt because there was no script to shoot.

There is a scene in the documentary where Wang's interpreter and right-hand man, Shen, is rapidly translating into Chinese the revisions just handed to him. When asked what he is doing, he turns to McKeown with a look of disbelief. He acknowledges that Chinese films are made differently, and when a script is approved it is shot verbatim. The Chinese had a hard time comprehending what was going on with these temperamental and bad-tempered Canadians.

When the filming was finally completed, six weeks overdue, the cast and crew were given a short rest before shooting was supposed to start up again with the Montreal and Spanish parts of the story. This turned into a 14-month hiatus while the script was thrashed out, and the producers tried to raise additional financing. The Chinese portion had cut well into their contingency, and essentially they had run out of money (originally the budget had been set at \$13 million). The extensive delay only fuelled the rumours about producer ineptitude and creative differences. Allan went public with his disagreement with Sutherland (he was interviewed by Barbara Frum on *The Journal*) and critic Martin Knelman followed up with a provocative piece in *Saturday Night* entitled "Anatomy of a Fiasco". It was becoming apparent that certain people within the industry were beginning to doubt whether *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* would ever start up again. One of the film's major private backers, Richard Racette of the Ottawa-based Uvesco Ltd, placed the blame squarely with Sutherland. "Bethune is someone whom we should all be proud of, and

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it's turning into a goddamn embarrassment," Racette told *Cinema Canada* in June of 1988. "Sutherland read the script before he started, now it's 70 per cent complete, the guy wants to change it around. It's not fair."

Deadlines came and deadlines went. The American completion bonders tried to force Kroonenburg and Clermont out and take over the project simply to get it finished. "We needed more money and the bonders was not anxious to put up the money," Clermont says. "Like all insurance companies, they are happier to take premiums rather than pay. The solution was to go into a tortuous court case or to find a solution within the system between the various partners." A solution was found, but only after lengthy negotiations. Peter Katadotis, director of production and development for Telefilm, who inherited the project from his predecessor Peter Pearson, said "at one point, probably about 100 times a week, I thought it would never be finished." However, Telefilm played an active role in getting a financial agreement from all the investors, and Katadotis said in mid-July 1989 (two and a half years after *Bethune* went into pre-production!) that the financial package was finally coming together "in a week or so."

### THE FINAL PIECES FALL INTO PLACE

To date, Filmline has been able to raise \$10 million privately. Eiffel Productions of Paris has put up \$2 million; the Chinese put in approximately \$3.5 million including goods and services; \$3.7 million came from Telefilm (including \$500,000 from a special fund for twinning projects—*Bethune* was twinned with a French film shot in Shanghai); and \$1.3 million came from CBC, which will be airing a four-hour mini-series after the release of the two-hour theatrical version. Clermont claims the total costs will be in the range of \$18 million, but the final figures are not yet in. Without a doubt, *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* is the most expensive Canadian film ever made.

Meanwhile, the Chinese were becoming quite anxious and twice sent delegations to meet with the producers, Telefilm, and the DOC to announce that they were tired of waiting and wanted to proceed with the film that they had agreed to. They put pressure on the producers to have Borsos removed from the film, having found his behaviour in China intolerable, but apparently Sutherland wouldn't even consider this. In the meantime, Sutherland went off to do other movies, one in Arizona and another in Zimbabwe.

On October 31, 1988, shooting resumed in Montreal and continued until the end of November. After a week off, production continued for two weeks in Spain, in and around Madrid. Due to the delay, French actress Jane Birkin was no longer available to play Frances, and British actress Helen Mirren was hired

instead. Anouk Aimée also joined the cast to play Bethune's mistress. Famed French cinematographer Raoul Coutard (*A bout de souffle, Jules et Jim, Z*) replaced Englishman Mike Malloy (*Clockwork Orange*) who shot most of the China footage. Another English cinematographer, Ernie Day (*Passage to India*), had been brought in for the battle scenes in the Wutai. Incredibly, there was still no agreement on the script and the Montreal-Spain portion of the shoot was very tough; sometimes the crew would be working 20-hour days with no downtime. The script kept changing and costs kept increasing. "We had been delayed so long, it was do or die," Clermont says. "We had to deal with the tax shelter aspect of the film, which had to be completed by December 31 and we had lost so much time with the conflicts that by the time we decided to go ahead, we were not totally ready."

The filming was completed in Spain on December 23rd, but the troubles were not over. The producers optimistically called for a Cannes '89 premiere, but that was delayed until the Montreal World Film Festival, first as the opening gala, then, with further delays, as the closing gala. That date slipped too.

But, the end of this incredible saga is in sight. The warring factions might indeed kiss and

## Bethune delayed again

TORONTO - The opening of the long-awaited *Bethune: The Making of a Hero*, at \$18 million the most expensive Canadian film ever, has been delayed again. It will not be ready for the Montreal World Film Festival as originally announced, nor will it be seen at the Toronto Festival. It is more likely to be opened theatrically sometime in November without the benefit of a festival launch. The producers, Nicolas Clermont and Pieter Kroonenberg of Montreal's Filmline, are at least hoping that a release towards the end of this year will generate a few Oscar nominations for the beleaguered epic production. There is even speculation that a spring 1990 launch is not out of the question. A lot remains to be decided at this point.

In the meantime, post continues slowly in both Montreal and Toronto. The picture is being cut in Montreal, transferred to 3/4" video, and shipped to Toronto where the audio post is being done at Master's Workshop. There the sound is being built from the ground up in Master's state-of-the-art computerized audio facilities. Master's president Doug Mackenzie says that his company has been involved from the beginning with *Bethune* and the audio post began just after Christmas.

The most recent schedule at Master's calls for the final print of the two hour English-language theatrical version to be ready by September 29th. Work will then begin on the French-language theatrical version and the four hour mini-series for CBC-TV.

make up if the film turns out to be the critical success everyone hopes it will be. Borsos, Allan, Sutherland, Wang, Clermont and Kroonenburg are still working together in an uneasy truce, if only on the phone. There is a sense amongst the

warring parties that they are too close, and they have come too far, to lose the opportunity of making a great Canadian film about Canada's greatest wartime hero, Dr. Henry Norman Bethune. ●

## Master's leads the way with computerized audio-post

TORONTO - Doug Mackenzie, president of Master's Workshop Corp., the state-of-the-art audio post-production facility located in suburban Toronto, told *Cinema Canada*, "We are a sound producing company, not a company for hire." Master's is currently doing the audio post for *Bethune: The Making of a Hero*. For Mackenzie, it is another opportunity to prove that his way is the way of the future for audio post-production. "The deal with the producer is important," says Mackenzie, "but for us it is more important to build the sound from the ground up."

Doing the audio post for film on video is certainly not a new concept, but it has never been tried on the scale of *Bethune* before. Mackenzie finds that it is a problem to overcome the fears of producers, directors and other creative personal who invariably distrust the technology. "Our job has been to educate about the new technology," he says. He speculates that there will be no need for sprocket-hole film post-production in five years. "Film technology will always be around, but it is evolving. Digital sound is simply the best there is."

One example of this technology is Soundmaster, a system developed at Master's that is now

being sold around the world. "People talk about Hollywood all the time, but we are literally bringing the technology and expertise to the Americans," says Robert Predovich, general manager at Master's and co-developer of Soundmaster with Andrew Shaffer. Soundmaster International Inc., located in Markham, just north of Toronto, is wholly owned by Master's.

Soundmaster is a hardware-software system that combines a computer with the post-production process and synchronizes all the various parts involved. This allows a sound editor to work faster and more accurately than with the traditional sound post. It can be used to edit in any number of sounds (at Master's they have a 64-track board in the editing suite) and cue an actor's lines down to a hundredth of a second. The system has been developed through hands-on usage, which has allowed Predovich and Shaffer the advantage of working out the bugs in the system and improving the software where necessary. Soundmaster has sold more than 100 of its systems to the CBC, NFB, ABC and NBC in the States, and the BBC in the U.K. It has become the standard by which other systems are measured.

Mackenzie is surprisingly modest, but very proud of Master's emergence as the best audio studio in the country. He began in 1972 in his father's basement, doing music, commercials and records. In 1974 he built his first studio in the Toronto suburb of Rexdale and by 1980 Master's had developed into a fullfledged post-production facility. Soon Master's was creating the sound for IMAX productions and many TV series, including *Night Heat*, *Adderley*, *The Campbells*, and *The Hitchhiker*. Movies and miniseries include *John and the Missus*, *Milk and Honey*, *Ford: The Man and the Machine* and *Glory Enough For All*.

Mackenzie is driven by the creative challenge and his desire to do the best possible job. Although the history of the making of *Bethune* has been fraught with delays and creative bickering amongst the principals, Mackenzie is pleased to be given the opportunity to show what his company can do. "*Bethune* will push us ahead," he says. "It will give us credibility with feature film producers." He is already making ambitious plans to expand his operations yet again.