

Norman Bethune, by Adrienne Clarkson *Book Review*



Bethune is third
from left

*Reviewed by Philip Fernandez
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Surgeon, Humanitarian and Frontier College Labourer-Teacher

Before he became known as a battlefield surgeon during the Spanish Civil War and in China's struggle against Japan in the 1930s, Norman Bethune worked as a Frontier College labourer-teacher in remote Ontario logging camps in 1911 where he performed the same gruelling work as the workers by day and taught them to read and write at night. In *Norman Bethune*, her biography of Bethune for the *Extraordinary Canadians* series, former Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson claims that Bethune's experience with Frontier College was a pivotal event that shaped the man he later became.

Bethune passionately believed in the founding principle of Frontier College – to take education to the people wherever and whenever they are gathered. Seeing the deprivations and lack of educational opportunities for the workers had a profound impact on Bethune that, combined with his Presbyterian upbringing, would instil in him a lifelong commitment to help others. That commitment manifested itself later when, as a battlefield surgeon during the Spanish Civil War in 1936, Bethune pioneered the mobile blood-transfusion unit that enabled transfusions to be done on the frontlines, thereby saving hundreds of lives. According to Clarkson, Bethune did not know much about blood-transfusion but read up about the subject so that he would become knowledgeable – a sublime example of literacy empowering thought and action.

In his 49 years, Bethune made his mark and became one of the most famous Canadians in history whose name and exploits are known the world over. This is especially true for 1.2 billion Chinese who remember him with gratitude and reverence for laying down his life serving as a guerrilla-surgeon in their liberation war against Japan.



NEW FRONTIERS in Literacy

Norman Bethune, by Adrienne Clarkson (cont.)

Book Review

Clarkson has deftly captured the spirit of the man and his actions without the cynicism that has informed some of the previous treatments of Bethune's life. The same youthful idealism that brought Norman Bethune to Frontier College in 1911 still inspires young Canadians to serve the mission of the College as staff and as volunteers. This engaging biography is a must-read for Canadians to raise awareness of Bethune's life and give him his rightful place in Canadian history.