A distinguished surgeon, Norman Bethune was much more besides. Fired by an intense compassion for suffering humanity, he was not afraid to speak his mind and to take himself into the teeth of danger in order to carry out his work. He designed surgical instruments, brought about important advances in the organization of blood transfusion services, and helped to lay the foundations of health development in China, where he died just over half a century ago.

Norman Bethune was born on 3 March 1890 in Gravenhurst, Ontario, Canada, the son of an evangelical minister. As a young man he spent some time as a lumberjack, a newspaper reporter, and a schoolteacher. He attended the University of Toronto and also studied abroad.

He was a stretcher-bearer in the First World War and was wounded at Ypres. In 1926 he contracted tuberculosis and was treated at a sanatorium in the USA. He gained an international reputation in Montreal as a thoracic surgeon, and in 1935 was elected to the Board of the American Association for Thoracic Surgery. Also in 1935 he joined the Communist Party, for which he became an ardent propagandist. He founded a free clinic for the unemployed during the Depression of the 1930s, and brought together a multidisciplinary group that made specific proposals in 1936 for the establishment of a public health service in Quebec. He was involved, as a medical man, in both the Spanish Civil War and the conflict in China during the 1930s. He could inspire admiration and love, and he could provoke disapproval and deep dislike. He became one of the best-known physicians in the world, thanks to an article entitled “In memory of Dr Norman Bethune” by Mao Tse-tung.

In Canada...

Bethune worked as a thoracic surgeon at Montreal’s Royal Victoria Hospital, a research and teaching establishment, in 1928, and in 1933 he took up duties as Head of the Pulmonary Surgery and Bronchoscopy Department in the Sacré Cœur Hospital in the same city. He was probably the first surgeon in Canada to undertake bilateral thoracoplasties, and the first to perform a pneumonectomy on a ten-year-old child. In Montreal it was brought home to him that
people's living conditions had a direct bearing on their chances of suffering from tuberculosis. He became interested in health systems, developed a social conscience, and acquired the conviction that, in order to improve health, it was necessary to become active in politics.

His great achievement in Spain was the organization of a mobile blood transfusion service for the wounded.

During this period he was always short of money and dressed carelessly. He drove a Ford convertible that frequently broke down. He disposed of most of the furniture in the room he occupied to make space for mural painting, to the great dismay of his landlord. In summer he camped in the hospital grounds and drank large amounts of whisky. He loved children and spent hours comforting those in the hospital.

... Spain...

Bethune arrived in Madrid in November 1936 to make his medical skills available on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. He had two great advantages, having endured the horrors of the trenches in the First World War and practised surgery under particularly difficult conditions in Montreal.

From 1933 onwards, Bethune had given his patients blood transfusions whenever the operations he performed were likely to be long and potentially risky. He appreciated the importance of blood transfusion in the prevention of post-operative shock. His great achievement in Spain was the organization of a mobile blood transfusion service for the wounded, the first in the history of military medicine. It would have been much easier for him to restrict himself to surgical work, but he wanted to do something even more important which his fellow Canadians at home would easily understand and be prepared to back financially. Thus the Hispano-Canadian Institute of Blood Transfusion was born. It was during the Spanish Civil War that Bethune coined the slogan: "Doctors, go to the wounded, don't wait for them to come to you!"

... and China

In 1938 and 1939, Bethune served as principal surgeon for the troops of Mao Tse-tung. He became Director of a new hospital near the front; after his death in 1939 it was renamed the Norman Bethune International Peace Hospital, and in 1949 it was relocated in Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei Province. His Spanish experience enabled him to introduce into China the open treatment of wounds as pioneered by Trueta, blood transfusion for soldiers wounded at the front, and a mobile medical unit to accompany the troops. He worked at the front with the wounded and taught at all levels, using whatever human and material resources were to hand.

A model hospital he established in 1938 was soon destroyed by bombing. In 1939 he started a school for health sciences which was eventually sited in Changchun, the present capital of Jilin Province. Now called the Norman Bethune University of Medical Sciences, it is one of the few universities in China recognized as an advanced institute by the central government. The post-war Chinese health system was influenced by both these institutions. In advocating and applying the principle of making full use of all available resources to serve the
population, Bethune contributed to the subsequent development of China’s health services, as, for example, with the barefoot doctor movement.

In addition to his accomplishments in the medical field, Bethune was something of a poet and a painter. Indeed, he saw himself first and foremost as an artist. In 1937 he wrote: “The true artist is natural. He follows the flow of his temperament. He listens to himself. He respects himself. He sees each new day as a creature from the deep that troubles the calm surface of what is taken for granted; he is joyful, intense, playful. He has a voracious appetite for life. He readily involves himself with others and with the life of mankind... The artist’s task is to upset things. He has to wake people up and shake pillars of society out of their complacency. He... shows us what is happening now and points towards a new birth. He is both the product and the teacher of his time. When he is gone, we are troubled and insecure in the face of realities we accept too easily. He upsets whatever is static, fixed or settled. In a world terrified by change, he preaches revolution, the principle of life. He is an agitator, a disturber of the peace, quick, impatient but positive, disturbing...”

As a result of a finger infection, Norman Bethune died of septicaemia in northern China on 12 November 1939.

In commemoration of the centennial of Norman Bethune’s birth, Canada and China collaborated in the production of this pair of postage stamps, issued on 2 March 1990.