

Who Was Kathleen Hall?

Diana Madgin

Rewi Alley, New Zealand's most famous old China hand, said, "If Kathleen Hall was a man, she'd be a hero". Alley became a household name in his adopted homeland as a founder of the Gung Ho cooperatives and a champion of the poor. His name is still magic in China, but Kathleen Hall's fame has really only surfaced in the last 15 years. Her work behind the lines in the Sino-Japanese war was secret and extraordinarily courageous, and like Alley, her entire focus was on the welfare of the peasants.

When China's President Jiang Zemin visited New Zealand in 1999, few Kiwis realised that deeply respected bridges of friendship had been built between our two countries for more than seventy years. A year later, on June 23rd 2000, a women's health clinic, tribute to Kathleen Hall's service and dedication, was opened in Songjiazhuang, where she was based 67 years ago.

Songjiazhuang is in remote, mountainous, impoverished Quyang County in Hebei Province, southwest of Beijing. The staple diet is millet and more millet, and the only cash crop, red dates, is grown on pocket-handkerchief allotments, about 2m X 1m. The winters are so cold your fingers can't press the button on your camera. In 1935 Kathleen Hall, Anglican missionary nurse from old St. Sepulchres in Auckland (now the Anglican Maori Mission), decided to work here. She had shunned easier posts and chose instead villages where there was barely food for one meal a day and there were no medical supplies.

In 1989, Alley's old friend Tom Newnham went to China to discover who was this woman. Rewi had asked him to write her story. In Baoding, the closest city, Newnham met Madam Ma Baoru in the municipal foreign affairs office. He asked about He Ming Qing, Kathleen's Chinese name. Madam Ma was astonished: why would a foreigner want to know about a Chinese person? "I accompanied Tom about a week and discovered that this was not a Chinese, this was a very special New Zealand woman who spoke fluently in the local dialect. In this mountainous area, everyone still remembered her sixty years later. The old people shed tears when they spoke of her."

The group of villages on the borders of Quyang and Tang Counties are even today connected only by paths, and rivers must be forded on foot. When Kathleen set up her first cottage hospital in the village of Songjiazhuang, local peasants constructed the stone building; the money came from Kathleen's salary and the Anglican Church in New Zealand. People came long distances for a bowl of rice gruel or medical aid, and Kathleen walked the mountain tracks to visit those too sick or injured to move, always with her big yellow dog. She talked very fast, but she walked even faster--"like flying" one villager said, "and climbed mountains very quickly". The story is told of her going out at night and swimming a river to help someone too sick to walk. Local people followed, they were so anxious for her.

Kathleen was concerned about hygiene; there was very little water available in these mountains and plenty of filth to harbour germs. She taught local mothers how to keep clean in their mud-floored huts, how to save their teeth from rotting by brushing them, and to feed their babies regularly. "The local people listened to her", says Ma Baoru. "Our people had their own way of doing things, but if Kathleen said you should do this or do that, they did what she said. She was very quiet, but there was a sense of authority about her." Kathleen built churches in Songjiazhuang and Niuyan'gou and taught reading and writing in local homes because literacy was almost non-existent.

In the 1930s there was a dramatic contrast between modern medical facilities in Beijing and what was available to people in the villages, which was in effect nil. All the supplies and many of the doctors at the Peking Union Medical Hospital came from the United States--the hospital itself was built by the Rockefeller Foundation. The problem for Kathleen was how to smuggle supplies from Beijing to her clinic, because by 1938 the Japanese controlled Beijing and the main towns and routes south. As a British subject (all New Zealanders were then), she was deemed to be neutral by the Japanese, who were concerned to avoid conflict with the British. This helped her to negotiate the Japanese blockades, but her situation became increasingly dangerous at a time when summary execution was the order of the day.

Not far to the west of Songjiazhuang where Kathleen lived and worked, the communist-led Eighth Route Army controlled the Taihang Mountains. At first she was wary of Mao's peasant army: her Christian training and philosophy was antagonistic towards communism, and she feared that the communists were killing missionaries. However, word of General Nie Rongzhen's support for local peasants

filtered through; in fact, he became Kathleen's close friend. Mao's tactics were to win the trust of the local peasants, then mobilise them into night raiders on Japanese outposts: farmers by day, guerillas by night. Kathleen realised that the robbery and rape that usually accompanied an army were not part of Mao's ethic; the Eighth Route Army was vigilant in enforcing the honesty and courtesy of its soldiers. "How often we would wait anxiously to see if all our young men (and some not so young) had safely returned," she wrote in her journal. "Sometimes [we would] give assistance to the wounded on their way up to the base hospital in the mountains, and sometimes [we would] mourn those who would never run cheerily down again."

Japanese attacks on local towns were extraordinarily vicious. The population of nearby Dingxian was bayoneted and then burnt when the Japanese locked the city gates and torched the town. Everywhere there was plundering, looting and rape.

The Eighth Route Army was badly in need of medical workers and supplies, so the famous Canadian surgeon Norman Bethune was hailed as a godsend when he arrived in the summer of 1938. Bethune was a pioneer in thoracic surgery. Angry at the rise of Mussolini and Hitler, he had become a communist in his thirties and joined a Republican medical unit in the Spanish Civil War. The shocking death rate from untreated wounds inspired his pioneering mobile blood transfusion unit, the first in the world. He then turned his attention to the Chinese peasants and their fight against Japanese imperial aggression.

Bethune met Mao Zedong in his cave headquarters at Yan'an, the town in northwest Shaanxi Province where the Long March ended in 1936. Mao described to him the plight of the Eighth Route Army in the Taihang Mountains near Quyang, where Kathleen Hall was based. Bethune prepared his mobile operating units and moved east. He was horrified by what he saw: the wounded in filthy rags and covered with lice, home-made thread to stitch wounds, pieces of wire for probes, a hand saw for amputations.

Once he had set up a proper base hospital, his biggest problem was how to procure adequate medical supplies. When he met Kathleen, he found the solution. "I have met an angel," he wrote in his diary. "She will go to Peking, buy up medical supplies and bring them back to her mission--for us!"

Bethune's request was formidable: the route to Beijing and back was perilous. Nevertheless, Kathleen agreed to help, sure in the knowledge that it was God's will to save men's lives. Moving the supplies from station to station required meticulous planning and the absolute confidentiality of a chain of helpers, innkeepers and a few carefully chosen friends. Kathleen personally accompanied each heavily disguised consignment, walking miles on foot or riding alongside the carts on her bicycle. Young nurses and cadres, keen to help the Eighth Route Army fight the Japanese, sought her protection en route from Beijing. One of them, Guo Qinglan, told Newnham in 1989, "She was very brave. A young, unmarried woman in a foreign country where it was very dangerous to be. I thought, if anyone can get me to the Liberated Areas, Kathleen can."

It was only a matter of time before spies reported her to the Japanese. Her clinic, indeed the whole village of Songjiazhuang was razed, and Kathleen escaped to Hong Kong. She tried to get back to the border area, where Dr Bethune so urgently needed supplies, but word came that he had died of septicemia incurred while operating without gloves. Kathleen had tried desperately to get supplies to him, but malnutrition and six months of helping the sick and dying at every village along the way took its toll. When she developed beriberi, a small contingent of the Eighth Route Army carried her south by stretcher to Xi'an, where her old friend Bishop Shen Zegao nursed her back to health and arranged her journey home to New Zealand.

Tom Newnham's search twelve years ago resulted in a fascinating book, *He Ming Qing, The Life of Kathleen Hall*. He inspired Madam Ma Baoru to begin her own enquiry, so that today she is Kathleen's most devoted disciple, escorting increasing numbers of New Zealanders to Quyang County. In 1996, Kathleen's centennial, Newnham led a group of New Zealanders there, including two of Kathleen's nieces and the Anglican Bishop of Auckland, to the unveiling of her tomb and a life-size statue in her honour. A smaller version now stands in the Marsden Chapel of the Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Parnell; next door in St Mary's, one of artist Claudia Pond-Eyley's stained glass windows depicts Kathleen among the revered women of the diocese.

Her centennial was also celebrated by the New Zealand China Friendship Society inaugurating the Kathleen Hall Memorial Nursing Scholarship for post-graduate community nursing training in New Zealand.

In 1998 Noni Johnson, then deputy principal of Whangarei Girls' High School, visited Baoding No 13 Middle School, where the authorities expressed the hope for a sister school in New Zealand. The first group of fourteen students and three teachers arrived in July 2000, led by Ma Baoru and Quyang County leader Li Yumei. Madam Ma's joy at being in New Zealand was palpable. "We are Kathleen's Chinese relatives", she exclaimed. "Being here makes us feel close to her because Auckland is her home town. People from Quyang County are excited by such a special visit."

Before she left for New Zealand, Madam Li received a delegation of villagers from Songjiazhuang. They had heard of her trip to New Zealand and had walked many miles carrying baskets of red dates. "We have nothing else to give", they said, "only red dates. They were all we had for He Ming Qing when she came to our village many years ago." When Madam Li told them New Zealand Customs would not permit her to take the dates, the old people cried. "In China one red date means one heart", Li reassured them. "When I go to New Zealand I will take with me the hearts of all the people in Quyang County."

In 2007, the Kathleen Hall Scholarship was replaced with the He Mingqing Scholarship. NZCFS now pays for books, board, travel and full fees for a student nurse from an impoverished area in China, to complete her training at a local medical training college. The first recipient is Wei Yunjie, from a minority village in northern Guangxi. Her father died of liver disease. and her mother, who plants rice and keeps a pig, is getting weaker. Wei started her second year of studies at the Guangxi Medical University in September 2007. She plans to work in her local community when she graduates.