

## PROFILE



**Frank Johnson** tells how recently he stumbled across the works of A. J. Cronin.

**T**hose of us who have passed three score years may remember a popular television series of the 1960s about a young doctor in a small town in highland Scotland. *Dr. Finlay's Casebook* was the name of the series and I was recently given a DVD of one episode. The quality of the mono-colour recording was poor. And yet beyond that, the genuineness of the characters – Dr. Cameron, the senior practice partner, Janet, the housekeeper and Dr. Snoddie the local medical officer of health as well as Dr. Finlay himself, overcame the crudeness of the fragile-looking backdrops and the muffled quality of the sound. There was of course a certain amount of nostalgia in seeing a much-loved programme after a gap of fifty years or more, but it was wholesome and moral, two words which can be applied to few current television series.

*Dr. Finlay's Casebook* was described in the credits as 'based on a character by A. J. Cronin'. I didn't know anything about Cronin, but when the same friend who sent me the DVD gave me copy of Cronin's biography, it was like discovering a hidden treasure.

### Beginnings

Archibald Joseph Cronin was born in Cardross, Dunbartonshire in 1896 the only child of a Scottish Protestant mother and an Irish Catholic father. Soon after Archibald was born, the family moved to Helensburgh. His father died when he was just seven. He and his mother later moved to Yorhill, Glasgow where Archibald attended St Aloysius College. He won a scholarship to Glasgow University to study medicine, which was a great struggle because of his severe lack of money.

During the First World War Cronin served as a surgeon sub-lieutenant in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve before graduating from medical school. After the war he undertook general practice in a small village on the Clyde,

# A hidden treasure

Garelochhead, as well as in Tredegar, a mining town in South Wales. In 1924 he was appointed Medical Inspector of Mines for Great Britain, and both his survey of medical regulations in collieries, and his reports on the correlation between coal dust inhalation and pulmonary disease, were published over the next few years.

### No substitute for God

His autobiography, *Adventures in two worlds*, is a remarkable account of his medical career and what comes out clearly is his solidarity with ordinary, working-class people and how he was particularly struck by those people whose faith underpinned their lives and who gave themselves totally unselfishly to their neighbours. Later in life Cronin undergoes a conversion experience – suddenly his lukewarm faith gives way to a deep understanding of Christianity. The last few chapters are both a revelation and a meditation. During World War II he reflects on why humanity has fallen into such violence and hatred. He writes: '*Above all am I convinced of the need, irrevocable and inescapable, of every human heart, for God. No matter how we try to escape, to lose ourselves in restless seeking, we cannot separate ourselves from our divine source. There is no substitute for God. Though we may not fully recognize it, we exist in the divine essence. The image of God is found in all mankind.*' He blames all the woes of society on its turning away from God and has a very clear conviction that universal fraternity is the only answer.

### A dream we all cherish

His vision of a world which goes beyond the barriers of denomination and creed is the way ahead:

*'That dream which we all cherish, the brotherhood of man, can become reality only if co-operation supplants*

Photo: Wikipedia



Cronin with family in 1938

competition between the creeds. Then indeed would humanity be saved. Yet such a change in the heart of the world can begin only in the heart of the individual, can succeed only if every man who calls himself a Christian would cease to give smug and self-righteous lip service to his own sect and get down to the bedrock of human need. Could we but put in practice the Sermon on the Mount, all the problems of our poor tortured universe would be solved, all the difficulties, apparently insuperable, which confront mankind would melt like mist before the rising sun. Of one thing I am convinced: nothing, no philosophy, no power on earth will restore our shocked and shattered world except the teaching of Him who bore to Golgotha the burden of all mankind.'

These thoughts of A. J. Cronin, written in 1952, were well ahead of their time. Ecumenism was in its infancy and inter-faith dialogue non-existent. He ends his autobiography with the following appeal to humanity:

*'When the world seems a place of bewilderment and fatigue, that is the gleam of light on the dark horizon, the remedy which offers release from misery and strife. Have we the grace to see that light, to apply the remedy to our souls? The challenge is there, the need is desperate. Despite the cruelty which men inflict upon each other, despite the indifference and confusion, the threats of war and open hostility, the destroyings and dispersings which afflict the nations, I have an inextinguishable hope in the moral regeneration of the peoples of the earth.*

*All human suffering is an act of repentance. A single*

*contrite tear, one cry out of the depths is enough. The publican, kneeling far back in the shadows of the temple, had but to bow his head in sorrow: "Oh Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." That is the supreme prayer.... the prayer for me.... surely the prayer for all of us.'*

### A. J. Cronin's legacy

A. J. Cronin died in 1981. Besides a glittering medical career Cronin was a prolific author. Most notable of his books are *Adventures in two worlds* (autobiography) and *The Citadel* (1937). This tale of a mining company doctor's struggle to balance scientific integrity with social obligations, helped to incite the establishment of the National Health Service (NHS) by exposing the inequity and incompetence of medical practice at the time. Cronin and Aneurin Bevan had both worked at the Tredegar Cottage Hospital in Wales, which served as one of the bases for the NHS. The author quickly made enemies in the medical profession, and there was a concerted effort by one group of specialists to get *The Citadel* banned. Cronin's novel, which was the highest-selling book ever published by Victor Gollancz, informed the public about corruption within the medical system, planting a seed that eventually led to reform. Not only were the author's pioneering ideas instrumental in the creation of the NHS, but the historian Raphael Samuel asserted in 1995 that the popularity of Cronin's novels played a substantial role in the Labour Party's landslide victory in 1945. 🍌