

A Sharp Scalpel or a Mighty Pen? The Legacy of A.J. Cronin

Adrian Năznea*

The Doctoral School of Letters, Humanities, and Applied Science, George Emil Palade University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science, and Technology of Târgu Mureș, Romania

*Corresponding author:

Adrian Năznea

doctoral candidate

The Doctoral School of Letters

Humanities, and Applied Science

George Emil Palade University

of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science

and Technology of Târgu Mureș,

Romania

E-mail: adrian.naznea@umfst.ro

ORCID: 0000-0001-9191-6302

Web of Science Researcher ID: AAD-2881-2020

Rezumat

Bisturiul ascuțit sau penița scriitorului?

Moștenirea lăsată posterității de A. J. Cronin

Archibald Joseph Cronin s-a născut în satul Cardross, care se află în prezent în autoritatea locală Argyll și Bute, la câteva mile de Glasgow. Intenționând să devină medic, Cronin a absolvit Universitatea din Glasgow în 1919 cu speranța de a deveni chirurg. Învățând cu sete de cunoaștere, trudind asiduu pentru a-și îndeplini dorința de a deține un cabinet în Harley Street din Londra, zona faimoasă a cabinetelor medicale, ambiția lui Cronin a fost spulberată de un diagnostic de ulcer duodenal care l-a forțat să ia o pauză. Revenind la visul său din copilărie de a scrie un roman, a publicat în 1933 Castelul pălărierului al cărui succes a fost atât de imens încât Cronin nu a mai revenit vreodată la domeniul medical. Această lucrare își propune să evidențieze câteva aspecte ale vieții personale și ale producției literare a scriitorului în relație cu pregătirea sa medicală.

Cuvinte cheie: A. J. Cronin, Citadela, chirurgie, Serviciul britanic de asigurări de sănătate (NHS), practică medicală

Abstract

Archibald Joseph Cronin was born in Cardross, which currently lies in the local authority of Argyll and Bute, a few miles from Glasgow. Training to become a physician, Cronin graduated from the University of Glasgow in 1919 with a degree in medicine and with the hope of becoming a surgeon. Learning eagerly and constantly, working hard towards his desire of owning a practice in London's fashionable Harley Street, Cronin's ambition was

Received: 22.08.2022

Accepted: 06.10.2022

shattered by a diagnosis of duodenal ulcer which forced him to take a break. Returning to his childhood dream of writing a novel, he published *Hatter's Castle* in 1933, the success of which was so immense that Cronin never returned to the medical field. This paper aims to highlight a few aspects of the writer's life and literary output in relation to his medical background.

Key words: A.J. Cronin, *The Citadel*, surgery, National Health Service, medical practice

Introduction

Many are the physicians who chose a literary career over a medical one. Who has not heard about the works of such magnificent literary figures as Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, Mikhail Bulgakov, François Rabelais? Doctors who left their mark on English literature are Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, William Somerset Maugham, or John Keats who trained as a physician but did not gain his degree. Apart from Sherlock Holmes's detective stories, Strickland's struggles, and the odes of the poet, a special place in English literature belongs to the grand literary production of Archibald Joseph Cronin.

Social and Cultural Background

A. J. Cronin was born on July 19th 1896 at Rosebank, Cardross, a charming countryside cottage which still stands today in between fields of grain and pastures overlooking the Firth of Clyde. The only child of Catholic Patrick Cronin and Protestant Jessie Montgomerie, A. J. moved to the drier Helensburgh with his family because of his father's deteriorating health where he attended Grant Street School. Following the passing of his father and struggling with financial difficulties, Jessie moved back to her paternal home which she had fled to marry across the religious divide. The Montgomerie were prosperous business owners living at Willowbrook, Round Riding Road, in one of the currently most fashionable streets of Dumbarton, and could afford young A.J.'s education in Dumbarton Academy. Probably the best school of the Scottish little town of

Dumbarton, the Academy provided A. J. with the educational background that would make him successful one day. Here, the young student won several prizes for science and English essay writing, his name appearing on Dumbarton Academy prospectus prize lists every year (Cronin file, Dumbarton Library). It was also here that A. J. produced his first essays and a play at the age of 15. The fifteen pieces of writing which also include quotations about flowers and animals, fragments from Shakespeare, Burns, Wordsworth are contained in a notebook labelled Archie Cronin with the Dumbarton Academy inscription embossed on the cover and are dated September 1911 to May 1912, culminating with *The Loss of the Titanic* produced on May 10th 1912, a few weeks after the unsinkable ship disappeared forever. The notebook is part of the Cronin files currently held by the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh (Literary MSS and Other Papers of A J Cronin, Acc. 10106/ 20).

After the death of grandfather Montgomerie, Jessie and her son moved to a flat in Esmond Street, Glasgow, the city where she found employment as a sanitary inspector in 1913-1914. Here, A. J. was educated by the Jesuits in St Alloysius College (1) in Garnethill, not far from the heart of the city. An ambitious teenager, A. J. secured a Carnegie Foundation Scholarship which allowed him to study medicine. At the University of Glasgow, minutes away from the Esmond Street flat, his diligence paid off and his name was again listed in the Prize List for session 1915 of the Dumbarton Academy Prospectus in honour of the achievements of alumni (Cronin file, Dumbarton Library). Due to the outbreak of World War I, A. J. enrolled as

a surgeon probationer sub-lieutenant in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, but returned to the university gaining certificates for midwifery, systematic surgery, physiological medicine and graduating in 1919. He took up various hospital jobs in the districts of Glasgow and married across the religious divide, just as his parents had done, Agnes Mary Gibson, a former university colleague.

Many of the episodes of his fictional character of Andrew Manson of *The Citadel* (1937), a semi-autobiographical novel, mingle with A. J.'s real life accounts in his autobiographical novel *Adventures in Two Worlds* (1952), as such, it is rather difficult to draw a clear line between reality and fiction. Two biographies on Cronin have been published so far, both posthumously, one authored by Dale Salwak in 1985 and one by Alan Davies in 2011, but, unfortunately, the author himself did not leave an autobiography. Despite being one of the best-sold and financially successful authors of the 20th century, Cronin chose to live a life away from the limelight and away from scandals that usually accompany celebrities. Despite the fact that many autobiographical elements were included in *The Citadel* or *A Song of Sixpence* (1964), scholars can only put the pieces together to build the larger picture of Cronin's life. On the other hand, a manuscript of an autobiography written in third person narrative does exist in the National Library of Scotland, regrettably, however, it has been withdrawn from the deposit and is not available to the public anymore (as of August 2022). Puzzle pieces of the big picture can be found in newspapers of his time, some such clippings being stored in the Cronin file at Dumbarton Library. Apart from the file, Dumbarton Library displays a portrait of the doctor-turned-novelist in the main hall in honour of his literary works.

The Physician and the Writer

As mentioned previously, A. J. Cronin studied medicine at the University of Glasgow and graduated in 1919, later gaining a diploma in public health. His interest in the field may have derived from his mother's activity as a

sanitary inspector in the suburbs of the city. After marrying Agnes Mary Gibson, known as May, the Cronins moved to mining villages in South Wales where Cronin worked as assistant to various doctors in Treherbert and Tredegar. The Tredegar experience is particularly important because he joined the Tredegar Medical Aid Society (2) which had a fund-raising scheme for the miners employed by the two large societies, the Iron and the Coal Company. By paying a weekly contribution to the society, the miners were provided with medical services, the idea which was later taken to a greater level and, with the work of Aneurin Bevan, was at the basis of the National Health Service (NHS) which still operates in the United Kingdom. Bevan, who Cronin met at the Society, started preparing the Bill in the autumn and winter of 1945, proposing to include services such as dentistry and ophthalmology and presented his proposal to the B.M.A. (British Medical Association) in January the following year. The Bill was debated in the Parliament in April and was met with Tory opposition, but the resolution was passed. The third reading debate in the House of Commons was passed despite repeated Tory opposition on July 26th 1946 with 261 votes to 113 (3). A similar scheme is described in Cronin's *The Citadel* where the miners paid a weekly fee to the Society in exchange for medical services. So powerful is Cronin's description of this practice that his novel is credited for the foundation of the NHS (4,5). It must be added that the novel was an immediate success after its publication in September 1937 both with British and American readership. The book was adapted to the silver screen by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer under the direction of King Vidor (1938).

Driven by his determination to succeed, while still at university, Cronin took into account the possibility of becoming a surgeon. According to his accounts in *Adventures in Two Worlds*, he was considering to apply for the position of dresser to his surgery professor Sir William MacEwan, alumnus of the University of Glasgow and dresser to his professor Joseph Lister (6), known for his

pioneering work in brain surgery and the development of bone surgery procedures with tremendous success in the field of neurosurgery (7). In the theatre where the surgery of a case of intracranial glioma was to be conducted, Cronin made an excellent impression on the professor by accurately describing the typical symptoms. Watching the professor's skilfully performed procedure, Cronin longed to be able to reach the same level of proficiency and mastery. Following the lecture, Cronin plucked up the courage to speak to his professor in regard to his application to the position, but to his great disappointment, the professor's reply was one that he was not prepared to receive: "In medicine, or some other field, I believe that you may make your mark. But of one thing I am sure. You will never be a surgeon." (8). The professor's remark came back to Cronin later in his life when he operated on a boy, who he supposed to be suffering from diphtheria, and had difficulty in performing a tracheotomy to save his life. Operating under the pale light of an oil lamp, he "remembered, suddenly, MacEwan's fatal words: You will never be a surgeon" (8).

While not as skilled as his professor MacEwan, Cronin was faced with another instance that required mastery in the field. Shortly after marrying May and arriving in the mining village of Tregenny, doctor Cronin was summoned for to see to the case of a miner injured underground. In the improper environment of the mine and under a hanging and menacing rock, Cronin was forced to resort to an amputation of the miner's trapped leg while acknowledging his limitations in "that bold and delicate art" of surgery (8). This episode bears a striking resemblance with one in *The Citadel* where Andrew Manson, the main character, makes the quick decision to amputate Sam Bevan's forearm. With the miner trapped under the rock and knowing he was not a surgeon, Manson performs the procedure successfully saving the miner's life (9).

An ambitious man throughout his life, Cronin took on a lifelong learning approach and became a medical referee for the Ministry

of Pensions, a member of the B.M.A., and a member of the Royal College of Physicians in 1924. Because his wife's health was deteriorating, the Cronins left Wales and Cronin returned to the University of Glasgow to defend his thesis *The History of Aneurysm*, a work currently stored by the Library of the University of Glasgow (record number b1634043; *The history of aneurysm: being a contribution to the study of the origin, growth and progress of ideas in medicine I* by Archibald J. Cronin, 1925). In his thesis, he provides evidence that Rufus of Ephesus, Rufus the Great, had been familiar with the condition of aneurysma, dilatation of the artery, which Galen was to describe later. The fact that Cronin had a distinct interest in the condition is also visible in *The Citadel* as well as his autobiographical novel *Adventures in Two Worlds*. Both of his literary works depict an episode in which Andrew Manson and the author himself in *Adventures* are being examined by Sir Robert Abbey (9) and by Lord Dawson, physician to the King (8). In both cases, the examinee manages to surprise his superior with the answer that Paré was not the first one to discover and describe aneurysm, but Celsus had done it before, the two episodes in the books being identical.

While in London, Cronin was becoming so interested in ophthalmic surgery that May presumed he would open his own practice in Harley Street (10), something that never occurred due to his medical condition and the doctor's recommendation to retire for half a year. As a consequence, Cronin and his family moved to Scotland where he started to work on his first novel. While the work was tedious and difficult, he was so determined to complete the novel that he worked day and night until he submitted it to a London publisher. Following the publication of his book, he never returned to the practice of medicine.

Apart from the description of the history of aneurysm, there are other instances in *The Citadel* which are rooted in reality. According to Richardson (11), Treherbert was the location of several episodes of the novel such as the garage where Cronin had his surgery, as

well as the stillborn baby which Cronin managed to revive. While the blown-up sewer is a legendary deed, the actual doctor who performed it was not Cronin himself, but the event served as inspiration.

An unhappy surgical episode of *The Citadel* which brings to light the carelessness and unprofessional approach of a reputed doctor, Charles Ivory, a West End surgeon in London, involves Manson as well and ends in the tragic passing of the patient operated on in his house for his cystic condition. While the procedure was supposed to be simple and straightforward, Ivory, despite his numerous attempts, repeatedly failed to get hold of the large cyst in order to remove it. Missing the point of attachment and incising the cyst instantly caused the death of the patient whose wife was assured afterwards and mistakenly led to believe that the husband could not have been saved despite all efforts. Such practices may have been frequent in interwar London, but no attempt had been made prior to Cronin to reveal them to the public. Moreover, what should be added is the fact that the film, produced in 1938 and subjected to the very strict rules of censorship, was the first to unveil such controversial events in the medical field (12).

Probably the culminating episode of unethical surgical practice in *The Citadel* brings to the foreground the case of Mr Richard Stillman of Oregon who did not have a medical degree, but was particularly interested in bacteriology and set up the Stillman Institute in the United States conducting research in curing tuberculosis in Guinea pigs. Stillman, building an asthma clinic outside London, had developed a new method of inducing pneumothorax to treat tuberculosis patients. The approach was a revolutionary one in those times when no medication, no antibiotics for the treatment of tuberculosis were available, a procedure which used an artificially induced pneumothorax in order to allow the affected lung to rest and heal (13). Although Manson had no

intention to assist Stillman with patient Mary Boland's surgery, he took part in the successful operation with a feeling of discomfort for having removed her from the hospital where she had been admitted and for having performed the procedure with someone unqualified. But there was a price to pay for this unorthodox approach. As a consequence, Manson was faced with the charges of unethical medical practice risking to lose his licence. In his and Stillman's defence, Manson pleaded that there had been great names in history, such as those of Pasteur, Ehrlich, Metchnikoff, Koch, personalities who, despite the lack of a medical qualification, had done more good to the world than thousands of doctors with degrees.

Conclusion

What Doctor A. J. Cronin will be forever remembered for is not his practice in the field of medicine, but his mastery in portraying vivid characters, revealing the realities of the interwar period, the discrepancy between small towns or the countryside and the luxurious surgeries providing fake treatments in London, and his voicing of unethical medical practices. For the highly qualified doctor with the ambition of owning a private practice in London's fashionable Harley Street, life took a turn, but he proved his mastery and excellence in English and world literature. One of the most financially successful writers of the 20th century, Cronin left us a valuable legacy of literary production on the topic of medical practice, his most outstanding work being *The Citadel*. So successful and popular was the book that many young people found inspiration to pursue a medical career (5). *The Citadel* is undoubtedly a must-read by any physician as it is the unprecedented portrayal of the profession with all of its aspects: ambition, corruption, socialised medicine, medical research or the struggles of building a reputation.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare that they have no conflict of interest.

References

1. Carruthers G. Losing His Religion: the Neglected Catholicism of A.J. Cronin. *Studies in Scottish Literature*. 2019;45(2):42-46.
2. Thomas-Symonds N, Kinnock N. Nye: The Political Life of Aneurin Bevan. I.B. Tauris & Co; 2015.
3. Foot M. Aneurin Bevan: A Biography. Volume 2, 1945-1960. Faber and Faber; 2011.
4. Timmins N. NHS on screen. *The Lancet*. 2018;392(10141):19-20.
5. Mckibbin R. Politics and the Medical Hero: A.J. Cronin's *The Citadel*. *The English Historical Review*. 2008;CXXIII(502):651-678.
6. James CDT. Sir William Macewen. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*. 1974;67(4):237-242.
7. Canale DJ. William Macewen and the treatment of brain abscesses: revisited after one hundred years. *J Neurosurg*. 1996;84(1):133-42.
8. Cronin AJ. *Adventures in Two Worlds*. Pan Macmillan; 2013.
9. Cronin AJ. *The Citadel*. Bello, an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited; 2013.
10. Davies A. A.J. Cronin: The Man Who Created Dr Finlay. Alma Books; 2011.
11. Richardson R. A.J. Cronin's *Citadel*. *The Lancet*. 2016;387(10035):2284-2285.
12. Dux S. *The Citadel (1938): Doctors, Censors and the Cinema*. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. 2012;32(1):1-17.
13. Pezzella AT. History of Pulmonary Tuberculosis. *Thoracic Surgery Clinics*. 2019;29(1):1-17.