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Introduction

Joseph Bottum

The problem is that A. J. Cronin was a hack—a popular hack, as it happens, and a skillful one, whose unhappy attempts to practice medicine produced a successful writing career. Beginning to write in his thirties, he quickly discovered he could pen a readable story in nice, clean prose, with a fast-stepping plot, a sharp dramatic turn, and a set of generally stock but well-turned characters. Filmmakers loved him. They snapped up nearly everything he wrote, from the novels *The Stars Look Down* (1935) and *The Citadel* (1937) to the stories that formed the television series *Dr. Finlay's Casebook* in the 1960s. On and on, the list of his filmed novels runs—*The Keys of the Kingdom* (1942), *The Green Years* (1944), *The Spanish Gardener* (1950)—each vastly successful at the time, each mostly forgotten now.

Except, perhaps, *The Keys of the Kingdom*. Something a little extra—something a little beyond ready and popular hackery—seems to have slipped unexpectedly into this tale of a Catholic missionary to China named Father Francis Chisholm. Cronin clearly felt an affinity for his hero. As his 1964 memoir *A Song of Sixpence* reveals, his own childhood in Scotland was similar to the early life he gives Chisholm. Cronin used *The Keys of the*

Kingdom to express his thoughts about the embattled West as it struggled in the Second World War, the Christian faith as it was carried out to a distant and hostile culture, and the shape that a good man's life could take if he gave himself to God.

That's not to say that they were particularly deep thoughts. When Cronin sets down what he clearly imagines are the profound spiritual revelations of his novel, they turn out to be little more than pious uplift, along the lines of "Why can't we all just get along?" and "Aren't all religions really saying the same thing?" Thus, for example, the elderly Father Chisholm, back in Scotland after a lifetime of preaching and ministering to the poorest of the poor in China, carefully explains: "If we have the fundamentals—love for God and our neighbor—surely we're all right? And isn't it time for the religions of the world to cease hating one another . . . and unite? The world is one living, breathing body, dependent for its health on the billions of cells which comprise it."

To which one wants to say, as a matter of fact, no. Not at a moment when the neo-pagan Nazis and the Japanese militarists were at the peak of their power. Not in an era when the mandarin Confucianism so admired by Father Chisholm had broken down into a China brutally divided among cynical warlords. Not at a time when Christian missionaries like Father Chisholm, sent off to convert the Far East, were being martyred from Singapore to Seoul. Then, if ever, was an occasion in which to draw a distinction—an era in which to realize that Jesus Christ brought something *different* into the world.

Curiously, that's one of the things that the novel actually does reveal. The unique Christian faith that produced a unique culture shines through *The Keys of the Kingdom*. A. J. Cronin really could write, and it is in the background to his story—in all that he probably took for granted—that a thick and interesting moment of Catholic culture is documented and preserved.

At the time Cronin was writing *The Keys of the Kingdom*, that culture seemed solid and unlikely ever to change, but he describes it with precision and intensity. The antagonism of Protestants and Catholics in Scotland. The priest-run school system that knew how to sharpen the bright, serious young boys and loose them like arrows on the world. The great movement of Christian missions in Asia that for three generations had captivated the imagination of Christians—Protestant and Catholic alike. It's a little-remarked-upon story, but the real origins of modern Christian unity are found in the mission fields of China and Burma and Indonesia—where much of the ancient feud of European Protestantism and Catholicism was set aside in a kind of ecumenism of the trenches.

All this is what Cronin knows and his novel captures. Surely that makes a world still worth recalling. Surely that makes *The Keys of the Kingdom* a novel still worth reading.

The number of medical doctors who end up as writers is surprisingly large. There's the poet William Carlos Williams, of course, and the essayist Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., and the novelist Walker Percy. The work of doctor authors runs from the genre-creating mystery stories of Dr. Arthur Conan Doyle, to

the genuine literary achievements of Dr. Anton Chekhov, and on to the immensely popular thrillers of Dr. Michael Crichton.

The early and mid-twentieth century seemed particularly flooded with novelizing doctors. Francis Brett Young and W. Somerset Maugham were probably the ones with the highest literary aim, but there was a kind of middle run of enormously popular medical writers. Published in 1929, Axel Munthe's now-unread *Story of San Michele*, for instance, may have been the best-selling book of its time. Warwick Deeping sold books like hotcakes, though there is probably no one alive who remembers the plot of his 1935 novel *Sorrell and Son*. Frank G. Slaughter's medical potboilers and Richard Gordon's *Doctor in the House* comedies reached large audiences, though their works are so faded they have disappeared even from the used-book tables.

And then there was Archibald Joseph Cronin. Born in 1896 in the Scottish town of Cardross, he lost his father at an early age and suffered badly from the ensuing poverty. Like his character Francis Chisholm, Cronin was brought up a Catholic, and he suffered as well from the taunts and bullying of the Protestant schoolboys who had learned from their parents to hate Scotland's Catholic minority.

A wealthy uncle paid his way through school, and in 1919 he finished his medical training at Glasgow University, where he met his wife Agnes Mary Gibson. There followed the usual succession of doctor's jobs in those days: a stint as a surgeon in the Royal Navy, residencies in various London and Welsh hospitals, and a cruise as the onboard doctor for a passenger ship. In 1924, he was appointed a medical inspector of mines in

Wales—the origin of his angry, 1935 social-commentary novel *The Stars Look Down*.

Health problems drove him back to Scotland in 1930. During his convalescence, he penned his first book, *Hatter's Castle*, the story of a Scottish hatmaker who longs to join the upper class. Though critics noted that the story borrowed heavily from other authors' works, the novel did well enough that Cronin decided to transfer all his energy to writing. One success after another quickly followed: in the 1930s, *The Stars Look Down*, *The Citadel*, and *Lady with Carnations*; in the 1940s, *The Keys of The Kingdom*, *The Green Years*, and *Shannon's Way*; in the 1950s, *Adventures in Two Worlds*, *The Spanish Gardener*, and *Beyond This Place*. By the mid-1960s, however, the string was running out. Though he continued writing until his death in 1981, the audience for his books was declining steadily, and few of his books remain in print.

Though his specialty was always medical stories—his most famous character still is probably Dr. Finlay Hyslop, the hero of the long-running British television series *Dr. Finlay's Casebook*—A. J. Cronin had an enduring interest in religious themes. Often the medical and the religious overlapped. His 1961 novel *The Judas Tree*, for example, tells the story of a wealthy physician named David Moray who betrays a woman on her way to a Christian mission in Africa. A disturbing chapter—quite possibly Cronin's best piece of writing—in *Adventures in Two Worlds* tells the story of a doctor who is gradually drawn into complicity with a woman's illegal abortion. And *The Minstrel Boy*, published in 1975 and one of his final books, features a

spoiled priest whose successful career after leaving the priesthood gradually reveals the emptiness of his life—and he sets off at last for the Christian missions of India.

The religious theme in Cronin's work is at its clearest and best in this book, *The Keys of the Kingdom*. Almost without noticing what he was doing, A. J. Cronin caught in enduring detail the harsh boyhood Scotland of Francis Chisholm. Almost as an incidental feature of his story, he photographs the faith of a Catholic world now lost forever. Almost in asides, he documents the great sacrifice of the Christian missionaries to the Far East in the early twentieth century. And almost through indirection, he teaches the joy of that sacrifice—the wonder of that faith.

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