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A.J. Cronin (1896-1981) has all the necessary credentials to be omitted from accounts of Scottish Literature: he is an émigré writer, his subject-matter often is 'non-Scottish', he is middle class and he becomes very wealthy on the back of repeatedly proving himself to be a best-selling author. If Cronin had set his mining-tale *The Stars Look Down* (1935) in Fife or his medical-story *The Citadel* (1937) primarily in Glasgow, instead of supplying to these the respective Northumberland/Wales and Wales/London settings that he did, then probably Cronin would have been hailed in his contemporary Scotland - as well as subsequently - as a fearsome, left-leaning writer of social realism.¹ Instead, with his tales of Dr Finlay, he is more frequently regarded as an author of late 'kailyard' escapism, although that has more to do with the television adaptations of the Finlay stories than their original, written form. In the latter, domestic abuse, medical malpractice and dark sexuality all feature. In the original writing, even the housekeeper, Janet – adored by audiences of the two television series as a largely benign, homely - if somewhat grumpy – presence, can be a genuinely nasty piece of work. The first iteration of *Dr Finlay's Casebook* was very popular throughout the 1960s, and even became infamous as the BBC followed the breaking-news of JFK's assassination with the immediate transmission of an episode. This brought viewer outrage via 2,000 phone calls and 500 letters and telegrams protesting against maintaining the programming of light-hearted fiction in such circumstances.² The frothy reputation of Cronin's imagination was ensured.

There was travesty also a propos *Dr Finlay's Casebook* on TV in that the late 1920s setting of Tannochbrae, was to all appearances a douce, rural, Presbyterian location with little to complicate this inherent identity. In the original stories, however, Finlay was a Roman Catholic who had been educated by the Jesuits (as Cronin himself had been at St Aloysius College in Glasgow), and who had for his uncle, a Bishop (Cronin's uncle was a priest). As well as being a serious commentator upon bad industrial working-conditions and an often unregulated, quack-centred, health-care system in Britain - in the two novels mentioned above - Cronin also, on at least one occasion, turned his hand to the theme of religion in a way that ought to situate him within a canon of trenchant, twentieth-century British Catholic writing. However as with the small screen in the case of *Dr Finlay's Casebook*, so here too with the silver screen, Cronin ends up being seen as a purveyor of popular entertainment. The 1943 film version of Cronin's religious novel, *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1941) is a well-known, early vehicle for Gregory Peck, a perennially (often repeated on television) much enjoyed mainstream movie. The film-version is known to many who have never read the book, although prior to (and largely explaining why the screen-version came about), it had sold 30 million copies as an American 'Book of the Month' selection (we

¹ Little noticed in accounts of Scottish Literature, admittedly including those written or edited by the present writer, Cronin fleetingly features with his novel, *Hatter's Castle* (1931) name-checked as a text standing in the tradition of George Douglas Brown's *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901); see for instance, Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh 1999), 58 & Douglas Gifford et al, (eds) *Scottish Literature in English and Scots* (Edinburgh, 2002), 707. It is especially remarkable that Cronin is not mentioned at all in F.R. Hart, *The Scottish Novel from Smollett to Spark* (Cambridge, MA, 1978).

² *The Independent* 18th November, 2003 (see <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/how-the-kennedy-assassination-caught-the-bbc-on-the-hop-78973.html>).

glimpse here why Cronin was to become so wealthy).³ Within the double dose of popularity – novel and film - enjoyed by *The Keys of the Kingdom*, it might also be weightily regarded within Cronin's oeuvre as, 'the last part of a trilogy [with *The Stars Look Down* and *The Citadel*] in which the conflict between the individual and the establishment is explored.'⁴

Within fraught and conflicted terms, *The Keys to the Kingdom* is a text that - with stylistic panache and symbolic depth - explores the historic condition of the Scottish Catholic community and also the difficult issues of authority and agency within the universal Church prior to the Second Vatican Council and following the important Papal Encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891). This document powerfully propelled Catholic social teaching towards the championing of greater social and economic justice, including the concept of Distributism, as sometime championed by Belloc, Chesterton and others. Very particularly it cared about the worldly life of disadvantaged people. In broad terms in *The Keys of the Kingdom*, we witness the Scottish Catholic community despised but on an historic arc towards greater confidence and respectability. Francis Chisholm, progeny of a mixed marriage loses his father and mother in childhood, his Catholic father beaten in town by a Protestant mob and swept away in the swollen River Tweed along with Francis's Protestant mother who is attempting to drag her badly-weakened spouse to safety. Francis's boyhood friend, brother-priest and eventual Bishop, the cultured, urbane Angus Mealey has a trajectory that sees him increasingly an ornament in 'mainstream' Scottish society, especially in the city of 'Tynecastle'. Francis originally wishes to be married, but the girl he loves commits suicide after a mysterious, never completely explained pregnancy (there are two possible sires, neither of whom is Francis). He is ordained and becomes a missionary over many decades in China, after repeatedly annoying ecclesiastical authority in his home diocese. In the orient Fr Chisholm has a very low rate of converts, much to the disgust of Mealey, and is noted merely for his unstinting love of the people, attempting to bring them food, better health and justice amid conditions that more readily proffer them starvation, pestilence and all the indignities and depredations of war.

The Keys of the Kingdom is a tale of the endurance of the powerless (including often Chisholm himself) in the face of powerful, intractable evil and one can see why it struck such a particular chord during World War II. Fr Chisholm's story is at once truly catholic and unorthodox. His original Christian exemplar is his grandfather, 'Holy Dan', a Protestant preacher whose naïve goodness has distinct overtones of St Francis of Assisi. His best friend as a boy, Willie Tulloch, is an Atheist who goes to the grave in this unrepentant state after being ministered to on his deathbed by the priest. Willie becomes a doctor and, as vocationally driven and brave as his friend Francis, he joins the priest in China. There, like our priest, Willie devotes himself to the oppressed peasantry, refusing to bow to the predominant cultural narrative that their lives are worthless. And Dr Willie is 'martyred', succumbing to the epidemic fever he is trying to assuage. Fr Chisholm, on the other hand, repeatedly cheats death, including escaping the same disease that carries off his friend as well as so many of his parishioners. These escapes might – conventionally - be read as God

³ See the movie's trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmdXdrhL4UQ>.

⁴ Alan Davies, *A.J. Cronin: The Man Who Created Dr Finlay* (London, 2011), 158.

looking after his own, but the priest's close shaves are rather comical, even somewhat absurdly demeaning. They succeed, arguably, in repeatedly reducing Fr Chisholm's dignity. There is a pattern in the novel of holy intention blowing up in Chisholm's face.

Early on in his Chinese ministry Fr Chisholm rescues a little abandoned baby girl, christening her Anna - as she is discovered on the feast of St Anna, whose name means 'Grace' and who is revered in Christian apochrypha as the mother of the Blessed Virgin, Mary. Orphan Anna is brought up in Chisholm's mission until in her teens she becomes rebellious and runs off taking up with a soldier. When Chisholm and some Protestant missionaries are kidnapped by the brigand soldiery, Anna comes in useful in that she helps the party to escape. Bathetically, however, it is revealed that one of the Protestant missionaries has bribed Anna to come to their aid: so much, then, for the apparent grace that on initial reading be assumed to be working through the story.

In perhaps the starkest example of Chisholm's mortification, the resolutely pacifist priest eventually teams up with his town's defending garrison Captain in a plot against a besieging warlord's militia. He does so in response to the militia making it very plain to the priest in a parley that they are particularly going to enjoy the women and girls of his mission when the town inevitably falls to them. The assailants have as their trump a large gun that is gradually laying waste to the town and under pretence of delivering tribute, Fr Francis – using his boyhood fishing skills – succeeds in blowing up the gun, instantly killing thirty of the enemy. The Captain who has accompanied him in his duplicity exclaims in the aftermath:

'My friend, I congratulate you. I have never seen such a lovely killing in my life. Another such and you have me for a Christian!'⁵

This moment is the crowning *reductio ad absurdum* of the novel for the Chisholm, who scandalises himself in the process, succumbing to agonies of conscience. There is, clearly, a Quixote-esque quality to Chisholm's adventures. Nothing ever quite works for him in ways he (or the reader) might expect. And yet the priest remains faithful, a rock (a Peter) who may well be turning the keys of the kingdom for himself and for others. He attempts to find goodness and justice in a world that never entirely yields these things up. He suffers, we might say, the indignity of the cross.

⁵ A. J. Cronin, *The Keys of the Kingdom* (Basingstoke & Oxford, 2013), p.255