

# Out of Hours

## AJ Cronin:

novelist, GP, and visionary



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AJ Cronin

By what appears to be an amazing coincidence, AJ Cronin, known mostly nowadays for the *Dr Finlay's Casebook* programmes, worked as a GP in Tredegar, Monmouthshire, in the early 1920s, at the same time as Aneurin Bevan, who was born there. It is almost inconceivable that they didn't meet, although there is no evidence that they did. Bevan worked for the Tredegar Workmens' Medical Aid Society in this traditional coal mining community and Cronin was particularly interested in the effects of coal dust exposure on miners' lungs. Bevan was on his way to becoming the architect of the NHS as a Labour Health Minister, while Cronin's career would take him to medical practice in London and on to a hugely successful career as an author. His first novel, *Hatter's Castle*, was written when he was being treated with prolonged rest for a duodenal ulcer, and was published by Victor Gollancz Ltd in 1930 to immediate critical and public acclaim. He never practised again.

Cronin's later novel, *The Citadel* (1937), (reviewed in this issue by Graham Watt as the first in our *BJGPLibrarySeries*), is widely regarded as making a major contribution to the thinking that led to the foundation of the NHS. Its hero is a young mining company doctor confronted with all the ills of unregulated private medical practice; in his words, the doctors who 'raised guinea-snatching and the bamboozlement of patients to an art form.' In it, Cronin said:

*'I have written all I feel about the medical profession, its injustices, its hide-bound unscientific stubbornness, its humbug. The horror and inequities detailed in the story I have personally witnessed. This is not an attack against individuals but against a system.'*

AJ Cronin was born in Cardross, Dumbartonshire in 1896. He was a fine athlete as well as an outstanding student; qualifying in medicine at Glasgow with top honours. He worked at the Rotunda, Dublin, and on the Clyde before moving to Tredegar. He was a Medical Inspector of Mines, and was involved in the mining disaster at Ystfad colliery in which 38 miners drowned, and drew on these experiences in his writing. He moved on to Harley Street in London and finally established a very successful practice at 152 Westbourne Grove in Notting Hill, west London, where he practised until 1930.

On 27 March 2015, the President of the RCGP, Mike Pringle, unveiled a blue plaque (above left) in honour of Cronin's life and

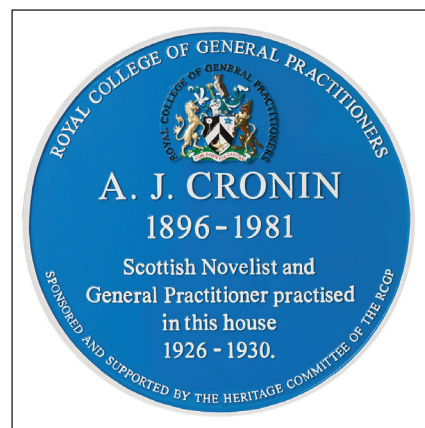


Photo: Tamás Koldi Photography.

work at a ceremony at Westbourne Grove, involving civic dignitaries from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and the City of Westminster, members of the Cronin family, his biographer Alan Davies, and David Rintoul, who played Dr Finlay in the second television series. The College Archivist, Sharon Messenger, devised this memorable event, which was supported by the RCGP Heritage Committee and Genesis Housing, and which also included talks on Cronin's medical and literary legacy, given by Alan Davies and the medical historian Dr Ruth Richardson, who had the original idea of erecting the heritage plaque.

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