

A.J. CRONIN

The Man
Who Created Dr Finlay

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Contents

Works by A.J. Cronin	9
Fictional Place names	10
Introduction	11
Chapter One	25
Chapter Two	61
Chapter Three	91
Chapter Four	121
Chapter Five	149
Chapter Six	199
Chapter Seven	225
Postscript	257
Acknowledgements	261
Notes and References	263
Index	275
Family Trees	287

A.J. Cronin

*“Bright is the ring of words
when the right man rings them.”*

Robert Louis Stevenson

WORKS BY A.J. CRONIN

- Hatter's Castle* (1931)
Three Loves (1932)
Grand Canary (1933)
The Stars Look Down (1935)
The Citadel (1937)
'Vigil in the Night' (1939)
'The Valorous Years' (1940)
Jupiter Laughs (1940)
The Keys of the Kingdom (1941)
The Green Years (1944)
Adventures of a Black Bag (1947)
Shannon's Way (1948)
The Spanish Gardener (1950)
Adventures in Two Worlds (1952)
Beyond This Place (1953)
A Thing of Beauty/Crusader's Tomb (1956)
The Northern Light (1958)
The Innkeeper's Wife (1958)
The Judas Tree (1961)
A Song of Sixpence (1964)
A Pocketful of Rye (1969)
The Minstrel Boy/Desmonde (1975)
The Lady with Carnations (1976)
Gracie Lindsay (1978)
Dr Finlay of Tannoobrae (1978)
Dr Finlay's Casebook (2010)

FICTIONAL PLACE NAMES

Cronin used fictional names in his novels which can easily be traced to real-life equivalents to help readers place towns with geographical accuracy.

Ardbeg	equals	Rhu
Ardencaple		Cardross
Ardfillan		Helensburgh
Darroch		Alexandria
Levenford		Dumbarton
Overton		Clydebank
Portdoran		Greenock
Ralston		Paisley
Winton		Glasgow

Introduction

My regard for A.J. Cronin's writing evolved haphazardly, almost subconsciously, with no outside stimulus. Nowadays I read only what appeals to me, and my appreciation and judgement of a book is free from any extraneous influences. I rate Cronin as an author alongside most of the great names in English literature, even though he is largely ignored in Britain. This biography, however, arose only partially from my appreciation of his work. The overwhelming impulse was to learn more about the man behind the stories, to discover what sort of man, by the simple use of words, could strike such chords deep within me, honing my senses to razor sharpness and expertly exposing the full range of my emotions: in turn, anger, despair and joy.

I was surprised to discover that only one biography existed, a 1985 American publication, *A.J. Cronin*, written by Dale Salwak, a professor of English literature in southern California's Citrus College. That, however, turned out to be heavily weighted towards a literary critique of Cronin's work rather than an account of the man and his times. Professor Salwak himself, in fact, recognized the need for further investigation: "There remain to be studied, however... the relationship between his life and his works... his devotion to Catholicism and social justice..."¹

Cronin, sometimes referred to as "Rufus" by members of his family because of his hair colour, was just over six feet tall, with an athletic build. His wife, on seeing him for the first time, described him as lanky. He had greenish eyes, and was softly spoken with, surprisingly, little trace of a Scottish accent, though he could "put on" the brogue when it suited him, and he did so in the many speeches he was called upon to deliver in his illustrious career. He was a quiet, shy man, though a touch of innocent Irish devilry, inherited from his father, was always engaging in close company. It was the Irishness in his character that his wife loved best. Alexandra

Cronin, his granddaughter – recalling conversations with her father Andrew, Cronin’s youngest son, and her mother Anne – recalls that he was spoken of as a “charmer and very social”, the kind of person people were naturally drawn to at parties. According to her parents, she said, he was quite a ham who easily could have become an actor.

He was, also, a keen all-round sportsman who particularly loved football – described by an old schoolfriend as the best left-winger Dumbarton Academy ever had. As a lad he was a Dumbarton supporter, and later, when he moved south, followed Chelsea, always refusing VIP treatment and preferring to watch from the terraces, mixing easily with other fans. He played cricket for the local team when he lived in Storrington in Sussex and turned out regularly for charity matches in the Richmond area when he lived in London. Also a keen salmon fisherman, he enjoyed fishing holidays (especially in Ireland), as well as using every opportunity in his extensive travels around the world to pursue that passion. He and his wife were also avid golfers. In Switzerland both belonged to the Lucerne Golf Club. His handicap of three suggests he was either naturally gifted or spent more time on the fairways than at his desk.

Unlike many in his profession, his life was free of scandal, and it was only his fame and fortune that prevented the description “ordinary”. After a few unsatisfactory skirmishes early in his writing career, he developed an almost phobic dread of the press, resulting in a near-monastic silence. He neither sought nor encouraged celebrity status, unless it was to his obvious advantage. Significantly, he neither denied the easy narrative of an underprivileged boy’s fairy-tale rise to fame and fortune, nor allowed too close an examination. He was purposely secretive, jealously guarding details of his life, his family and his personality from an inquisitive world audience. In interviews and books, it suited him to peddle half-truths, allowing the natural enthusiasm of reporters and critics to fill in the blanks, usually with exaggerated invention. Thus, from *The Citadel* and *Adventures in Two Worlds*, which both tell the story of a young doctor practising in the valleys of South Wales, critics and readers alike have wrongly assumed that the narrative relates to real events, and have concluded that Cronin himself performed heroically as single-handedly he contained a cholera

epidemic, brought babies back from the dead, witnessed mine disasters and rockfalls, performed amputations and tracheotomies *in extremis* and, most famously, joined a thriving west Highlands country practice as an assistant to a cranky old GP.

Of course it is possible that Cronin did not want to be remembered after his death. For a man who enjoyed such a high profile during his lifetime there is precious little original material to help a biographer. There is a full collection of manuscripts of his published works and a quantity of unpublished material, mostly short stories, notes and schemes for work that came to nothing, but few personal insights into his private world. He was a man without vanity who tended to shun publicity, which might account for the paucity of archived material, such as private letters, articles or newspaper cuttings. It is even possible that, unlike other famous personalities who assiduously hoard for posterity's sake, he deliberately destroyed personal papers. His fame (and fortune) is a matter of record, so he and his family, during his life and after his death, cannot have been unaware of the public interest in him, yet the silence surrounding him still frustrates those who are interested in him and his work. During the later stages of his writing career, he may have harboured resentment, even bitterness, at his exclusion from the literary canon of his time. He was unquestionably disillusioned with post-war society, and there is every reason to believe that he felt alienated from Britain after his move to America in 1939. Wherever the truth lies, the fact remains that the lack of data, his natural reserve, his deep suspicion of the press and his incessant wanderings abroad have not helped the biographer's cause.

However, the lack of information about Cronin's life has not prevented – indeed, may even have encouraged – much supposition and invention about the man, which transmitted from one observer to the next have led to many apocryphal stories. Passing references and thumbnail biographical sketches from newspapers and magazines abound with inconsistencies and exaggerations, further exacerbated by his publishers, who consistently proclaimed that *Adventures in Two Worlds*, published in 1952, was either an autobiography or an autobiographical novel. Other books, particularly *The Citadel*, *The Green Years* and *A Song of Sixpence*, were also described as “strongly autobiographical”. It is surely

not pedantry to resist the implication behind the term “autobiographical” in any novel, when a more accurate description might be “fictional reminiscence”.

Writers, of course, draw inspiration from their own experiences of life. These are then moulded, through inventiveness and creativity, into characters and plot. In this regard, Cronin used factual “coat hangers” – people and places – more openly than most writers, especially in some of his later novels. It is vital, therefore, that all claims about Cronin’s life are examined to establish whether they derive from evidence, from the balance of probability in relation to human behaviour, or whether they have simply been taken uncritically from the text of his books.

Right up to his death Cronin was well aware of his failure to provide a full-blown, properly documented autobiography. But one summer’s day in June 1976, in his lovely mountain home, Champ-Riond, in Baugy Sur Clarens near Montreux, Switzerland, he was particularly sad because “that bloody reporter yesterday” reminded him that he would be eighty the following month. Clearly in a reflective mood, possibly even a little maudlin, the omens were not good. His secretary and lifelong companion, Nan, told him that she had already bought his birthday present, to which he replied: “It’s the last you’ll ever give me.” She retorted: “Then why did Dr Keller say you were good for another ten years?” She further upbraided him for his ill humour as he reflected too morbidly on old age and the passing of time. The remedy for his melancholy, she suggested, was some good hard work, and she felt that an autobiography would fit the bill. He countered with the amazing assertion that it would be “a sad and sordid story” and that she might be upset to type it. She protested that she knew him well enough not to be, but he insisted that even she did not know the whole truth of his life. She persisted: “Then let’s have the whole truth and nothing but the truth... that would be a real book! Better than those little magazine stories you’ve been doing lately.” Nan’s coaxing supplied the motivation he had previously lacked, and the work went ahead, but she was never called upon to type it and it is not known if she ever saw the finished article – which probably turned out to be very different from her expectations – or if he ever had any intention of publishing it.

This particular narrative occupies one of nine cheap notebooks, all purchased in Montreux, almost certainly at the same time, and presumably after he moved to Switzerland in 1955. Because of the reference to his eightieth birthday, it must have been written in 1976, and therefore, throughout this book, it will be referred to as the “1976 autobiography” in order to distinguish it from references to unpublished data or documents which are often quoted from the other eight notebooks.

The 1976 autobiography opens with the word “Preface” at the top of the first page, followed by a short introduction:

I am reclining on the terrace of my Swiss country house, surrounded by new-mown lawns, great masses of roses and peonies in bloom, tall magnificent trees that screen three sides, leaving only the incomparable view of the lake of Geneva far below...

Such a conventionally lyrical opening may seem to promise a fairy tale, possibly the story of a relatively poor and underprivileged lad who, against all the odds, reaches the dizzy heights of literary fame and fortune. In fact, it turns out to be a barren account of one aspect of his life – his courtship and marriage to May Gibson and part of their subsequent life together – which, if published and authenticated, would have had a shattering impact on his faithful readership. It deals with specific times and issues in his life of a very private nature in relation to his marriage, women and Nan herself, and this may explain why he was not prepared to entrust his memories to his son Vincent – himself an accomplished biographer. For a writer who sought earnestly to represent truth in his novels, it is a shame that his own life should be anything but crystal-clear.

There is no doubt that the trail to understanding Cronin has gone cold, and the longer the path remains untrodden the greater the mystery will become. He was in many ways his own executioner. His self-effacing nature discouraged a biography during his lifetime, and without an autobiography – with the exception of the unpublished fragment described above – many of the details of his life and personality have already been lost for ever. Unfortunately, much of what has been written collapses under close scrutiny, revealing that the ordinary has consistently been exaggerated,

presumably to make up for the lack of substance, while that which needed thorough investigation has been ignored. Throughout this book, for those very reasons, readers will find numerous challenges to accepted opinion.

It is an altogether unsatisfactory situation compared to other British writers of arguably no greater literary ability. Choosing at random, there are, for example, two recent D.H. Lawrence biographies, as well as a D.H. Lawrence Research Centre at the University of Nottingham. Evelyn Waugh boasts three biographies, in addition to his own published diaries. Frank Swinnerton's *Arnold Bennett 1867–1931*, as well as the existence of an Arnold Bennett Society, assures that writer of immortality. Graham Greene even appointed his own official biographer, Norman Sherry, and to assist his perpetuity there is the Graham Greene Birthplace Trust complete with a Treasurer, a Trust Office and a Newsletter Editor. Many of the books by the writers mentioned above were adapted for the screen, which can only have helped to popularize them, but so were Cronin's. Who did not watch *Dr Finlay's Casebook* in the 1960s? That television series became so popular that when, after his own stories were used up, he threatened to end it rather than use scriptwriters, there was what amounted to a national outcry. Though he had never seen the serial, he was astonished by the affection that the public felt for it, and so he relented, allowing its continuation. However, if you try to buy a Cronin title from any leading British bookseller today, you will fail, while the books of his aforementioned contemporaries are readily available. Except by special arrangement, the same is true of the average provincial British library. Cronin has disappeared from the British psyche. Yet in an ordinary library in Greenwich, Maine, there are Cronin titles to be found on the shelves. Professor Salwak recognized the problem:

Throughout Cronin's career there has been a wide divergence of opinion about the man and his work – ranging from praise to derision. Few readers on either side of the Atlantic reacted to his work with indifference... and yet though his novels have sold in the millions and were handsomely adapted to the cinema, they are a topic strangely neglected by academic criticism...²

Salwak was not alone in his view. Preceding him by some thirty years, Alexander Reid, in a 1953 article, 'The Story of a Best-Seller', commented: "In surveys of Scottish writing over the last forty years the name of A.J. Cronin is often omitted. One reason for the omission is the fact that Dr Cronin severed his connection with Scotland early in life... another is that critical snobbery... writes off all best-selling novels as outside the field of serious criticism..."³ In the Thirties and Forties Cronin straddled the world of popular fiction like a colossus, outselling most of his contemporaries with ease, yet his popularity earned him few plaudits among the upper echelons of critical reviewers. The *Times* obituary of January 1981, though applauding much of his work, insisted that "his was middle-brow fiction of the most adroit and telling kind..." Too often reviews implied a lack of literary gravitas, reserving profounder recognition for others.

Nor could Cronin look to his lifestyle to augment his literary reputation. As has been discussed, throughout his long career he shunned the limelight, evaded notoriety and, despite the manifold opportunities provided by his great wealth, his seclusive nature became the determining factor in a somewhat ordinary, uneventful life. In September 1931 he confided to Rev. McClelland, the minister of Trinity Church in Glasgow – who was, at the time, arranging a lecture to the Trinity Literary Society and who later became a close acquaintance – that "to be provincial and bourgeois in these days of complexes and cocktail parties is a crime which is hard to live down. But I shall gang my ain gate..." Clearly, it was nature, not polite society, that stirred Cronin's soul. His wife once explained to an American audience the shared beauties of the South Wales valleys, away from the dirt and degradation of the mines:

Many sunny days came that winter, and there was a wild beauty on the high bare heath which stretched far and away above The Glen. A breeze always blew there, intoxicating as wine, which made my husband quote Walt Whitman – "there's a wind on the heath when I feel it on my cheek I want to live for ever". For miles under the racing clouds we would be lost in the exhilarating vastness in this primitive moorland, cut only by a few sheep tracks...⁴

Graham Greene, a contemporary of Cronin, is but one example of a writer whose background and connections have had a considerable, and possibly disproportionate, impact on his reputation. Privileged by birth, worldly, influential and self-absorbed, he had, throughout his lifetime, an eye to posterity. The weight of tributes accorded him was considerable. The *New York Times* obituary protested that the fact “that Mr Greene never received the Nobel Prize in Literature was a source of regret and astonishment to many readers and professionals”. Public recognition was equally unbounded with two awards: the prestigious Companion of Honour and the Order of Merit.

The argument could be widened to include the modernist movement of the early twentieth century, which owed its acceptance in serious literary circles as much to its connections in wider society and its outrageous, hell-raising behaviour as to its literary value, while in the world of modern art, outrageousness seemed to have been a prime requirement. Outside its artistic boundaries, the wider movement simply grew too big to ignore, yet its appeal was marginal. Cronin once commented that “the modern tendency towards deliberate obscurity and abstraction is surely an affectation which must pass...”⁵ Except as prescribed reading for students, how many people would reach for a Gertrude Stein novel to curl up with for a fireside read on a cold winter’s evening? Conversely, the conventional structure and easy style of Cronin’s books never hid the message within. That was not accidental. He steadfastly maintained that “in most ages great art has been simple and intelligible”.⁶

As a traditionalist in the mould of writers such as Dickens, Bennett and Hardy, he deplored the modernist movement, made up of writers who went out of their way to reject the writing conventions of the great nineteenth-century authors. Cronin was vocal in his criticism of writers like T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf – the darling of the Bloomsbury Group, a coterie of well-heeled, unconventional thinkers encompassing many of London’s avant-garde literary circles in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Their writing style purposely avoided the traditional requirement to tell a story in which true-to-life characters represent reality as it is, choosing instead to replace conventional narrative with radical new techniques such as “stream of consciousness”, wherein the conscious mind is suspended, allowing the unconscious free rein to

follow wherever it leads – more often than not producing obscure language and personal fantasies that to many were unintelligible.

In a speech to a literary gathering before the Second World War, Cronin chose to highlight this tendency by quoting at random from one of Gertrude Stein's books: "Tails, cold pails, cold with joy, no joy. A tiny seat that means meadows and a lapse of cuddles with cheese and nearly bats all messed. The post placed a loud loose sprain. A rest is no better. It is better yet. All the time..." Modernism found inspiration in the teachings of the new science of psychoanalysis, expounded by William James, Sigmund Freud and others: a science not in itself unhelpful to the problems of humanity, but in Cronin's judgement it had "a pernicious effect on fiction because it offers easy cuts to psychological profundity... to stress all the moments in life which are hectic and abnormal... but the novel is not a psychopathic ward, nor should the novelist draw from the casebook of the neurologist... his field is the normal... surely, literature is the mouthpiece of the humanities, not the insanities. It is to me, at least, a matter of amazement that such writing is tolerated, let alone revered. There always has been, of course, respect for the unintelligible in every art. To a certain mentality what cannot be understood must be fine: obscurity is the synonym for genius. But to others, myself amongst them, this thing is intricate, pitch-dark rigmarole..."

Proponents of the modernist school would probably have argued that Cronin was almost congenitally predisposed against them, considering the relative disparity in their backgrounds. Most of the modernists, whether in London or Paris, came from affluent families, never had to struggle for anything and almost naturally turned to experimenting with extreme forms of artistic expression and behaviour to avoid the boredom of conformity. Cronin was the opposite – once a struggling Scottish lad on the wrong side of a religious divide, with only a grandfather, a fanatically devoted mother and his own native wit and intelligence to help him.

Cronin suggested that writers of the modern school would always fail because they wrote only "clever little novels... the cocktails and sandwiches of fiction", whereas the major novelist succeeds "because, for the purpose of his art at least, he is taken in at every turn of life, by the hopes and fears, the joy and sorrow of all manner of fellow creatures" and has the power to convey a sense of

passionate reality. He ardently praised those writers he admired: Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, Somerset Maugham, Francis Brett Young and H.G. Wells – all of whom had reached the pinnacle of their profession, and never “ceased to lay hands on life” – at the same time suggesting, with all due humility, that there was perhaps another (“modesty forbids me to mention”) who might be included in their ranks. His speech clearly demonstrated his awareness not only of the pecking order in the world of letters, but also his undoubted aspirations to join those who had already achieved literary greatness. At that point in his life, just before his move to America, Cronin’s ambition for greatness seems indisputable.

It is to be expected that the fortunes of most writers fade after death, but Cronin’s demise, particularly in Britain, was swifter and longer-lasting than those of contemporaries of no greater ability. Towards the end of his writing career Cronin struggled to find fresh inspiration for his work, and his reputation suffered accordingly. A few critics scorned his efforts, but most, sympathetically, damned him with faint praise. The *Times Literary Supplement* of 23rd October 1948, in a review of *Shannon’s Way*, commented: “Dr Cronin’s new novel is reminiscent of nothing so much as the act of a once-promising variety artist whose performance has staled with repetition.” Nevertheless, failing to hit the heights with every new book over such a long career does not explain the disregard of his greatest works. It seems that once the popular readership waned, there was no secondary source of interest – like prescribed reading in academic institutions – to support the publication of his books. Yet, in researching this book, my visits to his homeland strongly suggested to me that there was no shortage of interest in the man and his books, making it even more difficult to understand why aspiring biographers, during his lifetime, chose to ignore him. The field was empty for them to occupy, and the grass was fresh. Perhaps they did not dig deeply enough to discover that the quiet, conventional Cronin was not all he was considered to be. His relationship with his publishers was often stormy, and his marriage, outwardly normal, was unusual by any standards.

When Cronin finally turned his back on medicine, his introduction to the world of letters had a fairy-tale quality. His books sold in millions across the globe, and many were made into films. If one

adopts a commercial, free-market principle, you would conclude that nobody is interested in reading his books, nor in reading about him. While such an explanation might satisfy a conference of economists, it is simply not good enough to explain the indifference surrounding A.J. Cronin.

Sadly, there is worse to follow. Visit his birthplace, and it is as if he never existed. Move four miles east to Dumbarton, where he lived and excelled in his secondary school, and which he used as background for many of his novels, and the only trace of his existence is to be found in the most unlikely setting. In the boardroom of the Dumbarton Football Club, framed and displayed on the wall, is a copy of this letter from Cronin to the secretary of the Club, written on 18th April 1972:

...may I say that I should be very pleased if you would care to use my few remarks on Dumbarton Football Club in your Centenary Brochure.

I can assure you that there is no more fervent supporter of the Dumbarton FC than myself, since as a small boy, living down the road from Boghead Park, I spent my Saturday three pennies, not in sweets, for which I was always hungry, but as the entrance fee to the football ground – a real sacrifice in these days when a threepenny bit meant something! Sometimes, on a very wet day, when I went early to the ground, and took part in pailing off the various puddles thereon, I was allowed to stay for the game without payment. I remember many of the players, in particular the great Finlay Speedie, and also many of the games, particularly a Cup Tie with Celtic, which then had the famous Jimmie Quinn at centre forward and “Sonny Jim” at centre half. Celtic scored first, but Dumbarton equalized, to the wild elation of the crowd, which included myself... Unfortunately, Celtic scored another goal later on, to which we all agree they were not entitled. If ever I should be in Dumbarton again I shall certainly pay a visit to Boghead Park. Even here in Switzerland I tune in every Saturday evening to get Dumbarton’s score on the BBC Sports programme.

I cannot help feeling that it is a sad day when part of the cultural heritage of the town is only safe in the hands of the local football team. It is also perplexing, because Scotland itself – a small, proud country – is well known for revering its famous sons and daughters. It has been said that, not having an over-abundance

of natural resources, the one commodity it had plenty of was talent, and that it exported it to all corners of the earth. Yet Cronin is steadfastly ignored. Other writers – Burns, Scott and Stevenson – are now part of Scottish folklore. There is never a shortage of anecdotes about the charismatic Burns. Ironically, in his meanderings, he visited Cronin’s home town of Dumbarton, as a passage from a letter to his friend John Richmond explains: “I have lately been rambling over by Dumbarton and Inverary, and running a drunken race on the side of Loch Lomond with a wild Highlandman...” The upshot of the race was that they collided, fell off their horses, and Burns “got such a skinful of bruises and wounds that I shall be at least four weeks before I dare venture on my journey to Edinburgh”.⁷ But the drunken, bruised and womanizing Burns eventually made it to Dumbarton, though one can only guess at the state he was in when he arrived. Nevertheless, the elders of the town made him a freeman of the burgh. Doubtless it is impossible for the sober, conventional Cronin to match the romantic, swashbuckling activities of the charismatic poet. All he can offer is a ride on a borrowed motorcycle along the banks of the loch, on a beautiful, blue-skied summer’s day, with his greatest and only love astride the pillion, her arms tightly enclosing his body and her auburn hair flowing in the wind. It may not have quite the ring of the Burns episode, but even so it leaves the matter of the level of recognition open to question.

Robert Louis Stevenson, another restless spirit, has always been close to Scottish hearts. He flouted convention, rejected the sanctimonious narrow-mindedness of nineteenth-century Calvinism and moved to France, where he met his future wife, before moving on to America and eventually ending up in Samoa. But it was not simply heroic adventurousness that made their sons so dear to the hearts of Scottish people. Walter Scott, a lawyer and conventional Scotsman, more in the Cronin mould, is also highly regarded in Scottish literary circles, and even has a railway station – Waverley in Edinburgh – named after one of his novels, together with a monument in Princes Street.

Yet in my own journeys around the localities where Cronin lived and studied, I can report a very vibrant and healthy interest in him. In Cardross I stopped a couple in the street to enquire the whereabouts of his birthplace, and within half an hour I was

ensconced in the living room of the ex-vicar and his wife. A couple of phone calls later I was able to view the cottage in which he was born, as well as the house that the Cronins later occupied. An hour after that I was in another living room – this time in the company of the current vicar and his wife – discussing other aspects of Cronin’s life and works. Then, on another visit, members of the golf club showered me with email addresses and telephone numbers of people who would, they were sure, know something special and exclusive about Cronin the man, as opposed to Cronin the writer. In Dumbarton itself, on a similar mission, a chance meeting in the street with a second- or third-generation Irish Scot who, like Cronin and Cronin’s parents, was himself in a mixed marriage – as well as the product of a mixed marriage – led to a guided tour of Cronin’s haunts, after which I was deposited with a retired local-newspaper editor – yet another settee in yet another living room – who sharpened my ideas of how to proceed with my research. Later still, my presence in Dumbarton Library soon got around, and complete strangers wished me luck and promised to buy the book if it ever got published. In response to newspaper adverts people corresponded, offering what little they knew. In western Scotland, at least, I have witnessed, and can report, a healthy and genuine interest in Cronin among ordinary Scottish folk.

Why public officials, whose occupation is to promote Scottishness and Scottish achievements, have consistently ignored Cronin is incomprehensible to me. It is not as if there was uncertainty about his roots. In Cardross, the house in which he was born still stands, as does the house his parents later occupied. The building housing the Cronins’ Helensburgh flat still exists, along with Willowbrook in Round Riding Road, Dumbarton, his grandfather’s house and home to Cronin and his mother during his formative school years. The original Dumbarton Academy building, now no longer a school, still proudly commands a place of importance on Church Street, and St Aloysius’ College in Garnethill is an even more impressive organization than in the early years of the century, when Cronin was winning recognition for his English essays.

It is not a case, therefore, of the area lacking wall space to erect a plaque, or not being sure where to place it, any more than there is a shortage of library or reading rooms that would comfortably

accommodate his name over the door. It is true that after graduation he left Scotland, but he did not turn his back on his country. On the contrary, one of the main literary criticisms in this book is that he spent too much time reminiscing about Scotland and the problems of growing up in a sectarian environment at the expense of wider issues. Western Scotland was in his blood, like the souls of his most memorable characters – James Brodie in *Hatter's Castle*, Lucy Moore in *Three Loves*, Andrew Manson in *The Citadel*, Father Chisholm in *The Keys of the Kingdom*, Robert Shannon in *The Green Years*, Gracie Lindsay and David Moray in *The Judas Tree* and, last but not least, Dr Finlay.

His characters exported Scotland to every corner of the civilized world. The least he deserves, in acknowledgement of his considerable achievements, is some public recognition, as a token of the nation's favour. In the world of letters, even today, the human impact of some of Cronin's work would undoubtedly complement any study of modern social history, and that alone, quite apart from his obvious narrative powers, should guarantee him a place in twentieth-century British literature.

Many references have been made to Cronin's humanism and social realism, obliquely suggestive of a latter-day working-class champion. Born in Victorian Scotland, his life ran parallel with the radical reforming movements of the twentieth century which brought freedom and equality to previously dispossessed sections of society, including his own. Almost genetically liberal, he was, nevertheless, no espouser of causes. His ecumenical instincts, perversely co-existing with an uncompromising faith in the Catholic Church, depicted humanity in its broadest sense, providing the canvas on which he sought to make his mark, both as an impartial observer and an explorer of the human conscience. He both loved and despised the human condition – cruelty and love, poverty and riches, ignorance and sophistication, failure and success – and he grappled frustratedly to understand the implications of both sides of the equation. To that end, he was always resolutely prepared to question and judge life's experiences in a never-ending search for truth. In the end, his place in the pantheon of British literature rests delicately on the vagaries of chance: "Many are called, but few are chosen."⁸

Chapter One

It is necessary to go back to the generation of Cronin's great-grandparents to understand the man himself, as well as to appreciate the meaning of certain key references in some of his books and unravel many of the claims made about his life and personality. In the early- to mid-nineteenth century, the main characters in the Cronin story were drawn to western Scotland from a wide area of the British Isles – County Armagh in Ireland, Edinburgh and Berwick-upon-Tweed in England – eventually converging on Glasgow, where the skilled and industrious could always find work. As a result, Cronin's genetic make-up was half Irish, three-eighths Scottish and one-eighth English.

On the paternal side, his grandfather Owen and his grandmother Bridget (née McShane), both staunch Catholics and founders of the Scottish dynasty – if that is not too grand a term – were born in Ireland in about 1826 and 1832 respectively. Owen Cronin's origins have not been verified, since his parents never left Ireland. However, his wife's parents – McShane and Smith – are known to have hailed from Annaghmore in County Armagh.¹ It is not known if Owen was from the same region, nor if he and Bridget McShane knew each other before emigrating to Scotland. Owen's surname, however, when he arrived in Scotland in about 1850, was Cronague, changed to Cronin in 1870. He married Bridget McShane in Eastwood, Renfrewshire, in January 1851.²

Their first child, James, was born in Glasgow in about 1854, and sometime after that date, but before 1861, the Cronagues set up business in Alexandria, north of Dumbarton. Initially hawkers – another name for rag-and-bone men – they were later described as “glass and china merchants” as they became more sophisticated and affluent. In that area they raised a further eight children, and in 1881 the entire family comprised:

James	25 years	Clerk, later Publican
Mary	23 years	Dressmaker
Ann	19 years	Yarn Picker
Joseph	18 years	Cabinet Maker
Thomas	16 years	Emigrated to USA
Patrick	13 years	Scholar, later Salesman [A.J.'s father]
Francis	11 years	Scholar, later RC Priest
Edward	9 years	Scholar, later Wine Merchant
Margaret	5 years	Scholar, later Housekeeper

By 1891, the date of the next census, only three children were at home: Patrick – later to marry Jessie Montgomerie – Edward and Margaret. Frustratingly, Owen Cronin disappeared from official Scottish records after 1891. However, though a precise date cannot be found for his death – suggesting he may have returned to Ireland – it is known that he predeceased his wife Bridget, who died of heart disease in 1894. It is significant that neither of Cronin's Irish grandparents lived to see their son Patrick marry, nor did they meet or directly influence A.J., Patrick's one and only child.

Much has been written about the Irish Catholic invasion of Scotland and the subsequent sectarianism, bigotry and racial conflict – sadly, not always objectively. When they decided to uproot in the mid-1800s, the Cronins would have been just two more unfortunate souls swelling the vast army of emigrants to the west coast of Scotland. Some made the move to better themselves – greater opportunities, higher wages, steady employment. Others, less welcome, moved for reasons of self-preservation. They had nothing and hoped to find something. Unfortunately, for the latter category, too often the “parish” beckoned – public assistance doled out by Poor Law Guardians or, in extreme cases, the workhouse. The Cronins, clearly able to look after themselves and intent on integration, as is evidenced by their change of name, belonged to the former group. As an attempt to gain acceptance by the host nation, a change of name was not an uncommon practice: other examples would have been changing from Seamus to James or dropping the “O” from the Irish surname.

It is, however, often forgotten that at certain stages in Scotland's industrialization Irish labour was vital, especially the “navy” who

dug their canals and roads and laid their railways. There was a saying in the Irish community that “Paddy sows what Sandy reaps”. But that was only part of the picture. In the coal industry in particular the presence of migrant workers had the effect of depressing wages, weakening trade-union support and breaking strikes. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that real animosity ensued on economic as well as racial grounds. Perversely, the truth behind these issues is irrelevant, because it is perception that drives prejudice, not reality. It is difficult to appreciate accurately the conditions of those times and the attitudes of the opposing cultural factions.

There are brief references to racial prejudice in Cronin’s first two books, in the characteristic venom of James Brodie against his daughter’s Irish lover in *Hatter’s Castle* and again, perhaps more reflectively, by Richard Murray, Lucy’s somewhat sanctimonious and stuffed-shirt brother in *Three Loves*, on her impending marriage to Frank, an Irish immigrant:

They came to Scotland, these Irish, to beget their prolific progeny, a mongrel breed; supplying chiefly the navy and the labourer, or in its higher flights, the bookmaker and the publican; a race unwanted, and uncouth.³

But, if there was even a grain of truth in the myth of the feckless Irish, it did not apply to the Cronin family, whose children all went to school and were in employment at the time of the censuses, if they were of working age. They were, therefore, responsible citizens and industrious by nature. Indeed, in their day they would have been described as a go-ahead family. Owen, the patriarch, was a china-and-glass merchant, a dealer in rags and skins, and a hawker, to whom the old Yorkshire saying – where there’s muck there’s brass – certainly applied. The historian J.E. Handley makes a more general point that fits Owen perfectly: “By way of huckstering, hawking and dealing in rags, bones, metals and old clothes, many of them rose from the wage-earning class to comparative prosperity. For some, indeed, the old clothes trade... provided a competence beyond the reach of shopkeepers engaged in more conventional businesses.”⁴

James, the first-born, started adult life as a clerk in the Turkey Red Dye Works, but around 1890 turned to the wine-and-spirit

trade. “Cronin’s Pub” subsequently became a thriving institution in the Vale of Leven, and it is possible that many years later James may have used his comparative wealth (discussed in more detail later) to help the young Cronin at a critical point in his career.

By contrast, Cronin met and lived with his two maternal grandparents and three of his great-grandparents in Dumbarton. His great-grandfather, Robert, head of the Montgomerie family in western Scotland, was born in Kilmaurs, Ayrshire, in about 1818, a rural area of the Scottish Lowlands, about twenty miles south-west of Glasgow. By trade a shoemaker, he and his wife Ann raised five children in Kilmaurs before moving to Oxford Street in the Gorbals district of Glasgow, where they appear in the 1871 census with five children. Their oldest child Archibald, Cronin’s grandfather, twenty-four years old at the time, was described as a journeyman hatter (the same profession as that of the character often considered to be Archibald’s fictional alter ego, James Brodie in *Hatter’s Castle*). It is difficult to be precise about the meaning of the term “journeyman”, but it suggests that he was employed by a hatter to sell his wares. Archibald Montgomerie married Margaret Perry, from Edinburgh, in 1872, and by the time of the 1881 census they had moved from London Road in Glasgow to Dumbarton with four of their eventual seven children. The second of these children was Jessie, A.J.’s mother. They took up residence in the recently built Levingrove Terrace across the river from the High Street, where in 1877, at number 145, Archibald established himself in business as a hatter and hosier, taking on a partner – a certain Donald MacLeod – in 1885. They remained in Dumbarton until his death in 1912, but changed houses twice – firstly moving to 1 Allan Place, the first property in a row of stone-built terraced houses (now demolished), some time before 1890, and then after 1906 to Willowbrook, the last house on the right-hand side before Boghead Farm, in what was then Cemetery Road, changed later to its present name of Round Riding Road. At the time the house, a substantial semi-detached red-sandstone property, would have been surrounded by fields, with views to the north of the Kilpatrick Hills, heights that enclose the south-eastern shore of Loch Lomond. As well as moving some time between 1885 and 1900, Archibald gave

up his hatter's business and took up a position as a commercial clerk in Denny's shipyard.

Cronin's other great-grandparents were his grandmother's father, Francis Perry, a journeyman blacksmith from Berwick-upon-Tweed, and his wife Jessie, born in Edinburgh. They had lived for a time with her parents in Edinburgh before moving with their family to Dover Street in Glasgow, on the opposite bank of the Clyde from the Montgomeries. In the fullness of time, Cronin's grandfather, Archibald Montgomerie, offered all three great-grandparents a home, first at 1 Allan Place and then at Willowbrook, where Cronin became acquainted with them.

Over a period of forty to fifty years, therefore, the two families first made for Glasgow and then branched out to the outlying town of Dumbarton, home of the Montgomeries, and the Vale of Leven, home of the Cronins. Both places stand roughly adjacent with the River Leven, not far from its confluence with the Clyde, about fifteen miles downstream from Glasgow. From the early 1700s to the mid-1800s Dumbarton's chief occupation was glassmaking. Following its decline, the greatest impetus to the development of the town was shipbuilding and marine engineering, both becoming synonymous with the Clyde for a hundred years or more, during which time all kinds of ships came out of its yards, as well as aeroplanes and hovercraft. Even the first helicopter was constructed in one of the shipyards in 1909 – when Cronin was a pupil at the Academy. William Denny and Brothers, where Archibald Montgomerie worked as a shipyard clerk, was the last surviving shipyard, eventually closing in 1963. Before the final demise of the shipbuilding industry, Dumbarton fast became a centre for whisky production, but this too did not last, falling foul of takeovers by international conglomerates. With its decline, Dumbarton has increasingly become a commuter town for Glasgow.

Incredibly, after such a long and involved journey for the two families, the immigrant, industrious, Catholic Cronins and the sober, conventional, Presbyterian Montgomeries finally settled less than two miles apart in an area of land about three miles north of the River Clyde, and one cannot help wondering if they were aware of each other before the intended marriage between Patrick and Jessie, Cronin's father and mother – a marriage that was across the religious divide – rocked both households. Dumbarton and the

Vale of Leven were small communities in the 1890s, in which any whiff of scandal would have raged like a forest fire.

Crucial to an understanding of Cronin's childhood is the courtship and marriage of his parents – emotively referred to as a “mixed marriage”, i.e. between a Catholic and a Protestant – and the subsequent family conflicts. There are many assumptions about the reactions to the marriage, but no facts. In general terms, at that time in history, marriages “across the divide” caused problems within families, the severity of the difficulty depending on the innate bigotry of the individuals concerned. All that is known of Patrick Cronin's marriage to Jessie Montgomerie comes from an unpublished account of their meeting and brief courtship written by Cronin, and the several references in Cronin's novel *A Song of Sixpence*.⁵ From the unpublished account we learn that Jessie, his mother, was a Montgomerie, spelt, according to her father, not with the corrupt and plebeian “y”, but with “ie” – a name that shone through the pages of *Debrett's* and the annals of history. It seems undeniable that Archibald Montgomerie was proud of his name and ancestry, although he lived humbly in a small villa on the outskirts of Levenford – in reality, Dumbarton (Cronin used fake place names in these real-life accounts just as he often did in his novels). Not only did he love his daughter, but he was immensely, perhaps inordinately proud of her, treasuring her as his very own. In the mornings he liked to walk with Jessie to Dumbarton Station, where their paths separated: he took the train to work, while she walked to Dumbarton Academy, where she worked as a pupil teacher. At the end of her day it was her habit to buy the *Scotsman* for her father, but on one occasion, sometime before her eighteenth birthday, that particular newspaper had not been delivered. Miss Duthie, the shop assistant, was most apologetic – at which point a young man, who had just got off the train from Glasgow, overheard the conversation and offered Jessie his copy. He was none other than Patrick Cronin, described by Jessie as “distressingly handsome, with a fair complexion, eyes of light hazel and well-brushed, reddish-brown hair that exactly matched his suit”.

After the customary pleasantries came the introductions, which Patrick felt required some explanation:

“My name may shock you, Miss Montgomerie. I am Patrick Cronin.”

“It’s an odd name,” she smiled. “Are you German?”

“No, Miss Montgomerie, much worse. I am of a race that is despised, even hated, in your country. I am an Irishman.”

The story, touchingly told by Cronin, then unfolded, with Jessie ending up totally smitten. Next day she received a note from Patrick, begging her to meet him the following Monday for a drive around Loch Lomond in a friend’s car, and telling her that he had been thinking of her day and night. Jessie lied to her mother and invented a walking trip with her friend Jean Douglas. And so the die was cast.

Patrick, a charming, handsome and well-set-up man of the world, was obviously touched with the blarney and well able to sweep a girl off her feet. Indeed, he had done it many times before. He was well in with Jules, the head waiter of the hotel he normally frequented, and was practised in the art of greasing palms swiftly and unseen. Jules, as a result, was attentive in the extreme, and at one point during the meal quietly asked Patrick if he required a room for the afternoon as he had obviously done on previous occasions. His reply was, “Of course not, Jules, you ass. This is altogether different.”

After a fresh-salmon lunch with Chablis – her first taste of wine – they had coffee in the garden, where Jules presented Jessie with a long-stemmed red rose. Then, on the way home, Patrick proposed, and to the age-old four-word question she replied, “I will, Patrick, I will. This very minute” – whereupon she flung her arms around his neck. At the same time, she confided to him that her father wanted to pledge her to a fat, pimply old man, a minister of the Church, who had already had one wife.

Nothing was said to her parents, but the next week she left home with an explanatory note behind her, and they were married in a registry office in Blythswood, south of the river, with a solicitor friend, Robert Scott, as witness. From there they went to Patrick’s brother – Father Francis Cronin – at the Catholic Presbytery in Gourrock for their honeymoon. Miss O’Reilly, Francis’s housekeeper, installed them in the best room, with views of the Firth on one side and the lovely gardens on the other. Francis insisted that their marriage be confirmed in Church, assuring Jessie that it

would be a simple ceremony, little different from that of her own church. And so began married life.

The unpublished account is much fuller than that in *A Song of Sixpence*, though the connection with Dumbarton railway station still exists, as does the obvious, mutual attraction: “As they looked into each other’s eyes, the damage was done.”⁶ In both versions, therefore, Cronin describes a case of love at first sight. In the published book, Laurence Carroll, who is in many ways Cronin’s proxy, commenting on his mother’s attachment to his father, says, “I am convinced she would have willingly accompanied him to a Hindu Temple had he professed that faith.”⁷

It is likely that some of these events, from both accounts, really happened. Patrick would have needed to change trains at Dumbarton to proceed to Alexandria, and Jessie would almost certainly have passed the station every day on her way to work. Official documentation confirms their marriage in the Blythswood registry office. The trip around the loch and the salmon lunch with Chablis, however, though a lovely story, are more unlikely, while the honeymoon at his brother’s Catholic presbytery would almost certainly never have been allowed.

Sectarianism and racism were potent forces in people’s everyday lives at that time, and so Patrick and Jessie’s love and intended marriage could only have caused heartache and dismay. Whether it is true that Jessie’s father had planned for her to marry a Protestant minister will perhaps never be known, but accepting his serious allegiance to the Presbyterian faith, he was hardly going to welcome the prospect of an Irish Catholic marrying his favourite daughter – especially a Cronin. As mentioned earlier, the two families lived only a few miles apart, and while the Montgomerie lived a respectable, conventional, low-key existence, their perception of the Cronins may have been coloured by the existence of “Cronin’s Pub”, owned by James, the eldest son of the family, which fast became an institution in the Vale of Leven. That kind of notoriety, in addition to their Catholic faith, would hardly have endeared them to Archibald Montgomerie, who was probably a teetotaler. Unfortunately, nothing is known about Jessie’s parents, neither psychologically nor physically. There is no reason to suppose that they were anything but typical of their generation – in which case Margaret Montgomerie would have been a dutiful,

subservient wife whose main function in life would have been to produce and raise children in the time-honoured ways, keep house and support her husband. Archibald's role would have been that of head of the household, breadwinner and spiritual guide. It would be all too easy simply to accept the widely held belief that Archibald Montgomerie was a "stern", "strict" or "staunch" Presbyterian, implying an implacable unreasonableness bordering on domination – characteristics that provided the foundation for one of Cronin's best-known literary characters, the ogre James Brodie in *Hatter's Castle*. Equally, any suggestion that there were strong similarities between his real grandfather and the fictional James Brodie should also be resisted, except that they were both Victorian fathers. Whatever Archibald's temperament, it was not unusual in the mid-1890s for parents to have a considerable influence over their children's marriages, even to the choice of partner. Objecting to his daughter marrying a Catholic, therefore, was not only predictable, but perfectly reasonable.

There are contradictions between the two available versions of events – the unpublished account described above and the novel *A Song of Sixpence*. However, while some claims in the unpublished version can be proved to be wrong, the fictional account conforms to expectation and is probably not far from the truth. In the novel, it is explained to Laurence that his mother's parents

...were dyed-in-the-wool Presbyterians, true blue, couldn't have been stricter, and she was the apple of her old man's eye, who, to make it worse, had a Scotch pedigree that went right back to William Wallace... so here was a lovely girl, well thought of in the town, helped her mother in the house, sang like an angel in the church choir, never put a foot wrong... when they found out she was going steady with an upstart Irish RC, blood brother to a publican and, God help us, a priest, hell's bells, man, did they raise the roof. Prayers and tears. For weeks there was the devil to pay while they tried every mortal thing to keep them apart. It couldn't be done, man. In the end, with never a word... they just up and off to the registry office. She knew her folks would never speak to her again...⁸

Undoubtedly, the affair would have hit the local headlines, engulfing not only the main protagonists, but the entire Montgomerie

household, and it probably would have been impossible to contain the scandal within the walls of 1 Allan Place. Jessie had only two options: continue the relationship, defying convention and ignoring her parents, or give up Patrick. Courageous or foolhardy, genuinely in love or blindly infatuated, she took a great risk and chose the former. In the unpublished account of events, it is claimed that Jessie was not yet eighteen when she left home to marry Patrick, and that she was a pupil teacher at Levenford Academy. In fact, neither is true. She was twenty and worked as a telephone operator. But, more to the point, she was seven months pregnant. She married on 19th May 1896, and gave birth to her son two months later.

Jessie was, therefore, underage. From 1753 the age of consent to marry without parental permission was twenty-one, and the fact that the marriage required a sheriff's licence indicates that either permission was never sought or it was refused. The licence was issued on instructions from two witnesses – William Lees, a spirit salesman of 73 Sinclair Street, Helensburgh, and Jessie Buchannan or Lees of the same address. They must have been friends of Patrick, and one cannot help noting the fact that they were obviously living together in an unmarried state.

It is, of course, possible that Jessie never mentioned her love for Patrick at all, concealed her pregnancy and carried on as usual until she could hide it no longer, then simply left home with or without an explanation. Ignorant of the facts, her parents would have been both bewildered and upset, but at the same time suspicious. Eventually, they would have discovered the truth and would have become reconciled in their own way. If, on the other hand, they knew, they would have been shattered at the prospect that she was about to marry a Catholic, and even more distraught that she was pregnant. But why did Jessie leave it so late? At seven months pregnant, concealment would have been virtually impossible, given that the fashions of that period were wasp-waisted or hourglass. And how could she have hidden other tell-tale signs of pregnancy from her mother, who had borne seven children of her own? To add to the difficulty, Jessie was only 5' 2" tall and slightly built, and also – admittedly in unpublished references only – the baby she was carrying was big and possibly in a breech position.

The alternative that her parents were ignorant of the affair is unconvincing, mainly because of the inherent difficulty in keeping

relationships secret in a large family and in small communities. It is more likely that her parents knew of the affair early on, and were in the process of persuading or cajoling her to give him up, hoping that the longer they worked on her the greater their chances of success. The conduct of that household over many months will remain a mystery for ever, as will Jessie's reason for waiting such a long time before acting. But the unanswered question remains – did Jessie admit to the pregnancy before she left? And, if so, when? If her parents knew, then it is possible they might have been grudgingly prepared to forgive her, and that together they might have devised a plan for concealment, involving Jessie giving up work and staying mostly indoors, until she could be moved away temporarily, perhaps to a distant relative, for the birth. Researchers of the period tell us that families went to great lengths to keep their guilty secret under wraps, such was the shame they felt.⁹ If such a plan was ever devised, it was clearly scuppered by a change of mind, Jessie presumably realizing that she could not give Patrick up. On the other hand, Jessie may have delayed telling them until the very last minute, giving them little time to marshal their thoughts and no time to develop a plan. In conditions of such extreme urgency Jessie may have received a resigned and disappointed farewell, or she may have been shown the door in disgrace. In neither case is it clear whether her parents considered marrying a Catholic or bearing a child out of wedlock to be the greater sin.

It is impossible for one generation to relive the thoughts and passions of others. From a modern perspective, with sex outside marriage almost the norm and illegitimacy destigmatized, it is easy to underestimate the shame and frustration that would have been felt by her family, not to mention her father's righteous abhorrence of the violation of his daughter, which would have been relayed throughout the close-knit, moralistic community. "Our forebears placed great emphasis on the bonds of marriage, and those who deviated from this social norm faced condemnation from their community."¹⁰ Implicit in that reference to the bonds of marriage is the expectation of purity and virginity before marriage. Those who only managed to get to the altar in the nick of time were not free from disapproval. Historical references demonstrate the uncompromising moral attitudes in nineteenth-century society: "Lots of foundlings were illegitimate. A look at the assize records for the

nineteenth century and you'll find that half the murder victims were little babies... we don't think twice about illegitimacy now; it's really hard to get your mind around the idea that the shame was once so awful that women were prepared to kill their babies."¹¹

Archibald Montgomerie, Cronin's grandfather, is generally considered to be the villain of the piece in this whole episode, in some quarters blamed entirely for the alleged hardship of Cronin's and his mother's life up to and after the death of Patrick. But the old man perhaps gets a worse press than he deserves. If only partially true, the claim – in both *A Song of Sixpence* and the unpublished account – that Jessie was the apple of her father's eye would explain his reaction. Rules were strict in Victorian Scotland, conventions were not flouted with impunity, virginity was valued and sex before marriage was castigated. No wonder there was consternation in Jessie's family, especially as the culprit – which is how they would have viewed Patrick – was an Irish Catholic. Some years later, even Emmeline Pankhurst was alleged to have been in “deep shock” when her own daughter gave birth to a son outside marriage.¹²

The only factor Jessie could not account for was ill health, and sadly it was such an occurrence that eventually dealt a blow to her future prospects. It would seem helpful, in this connection, to touch briefly on child welfare. Jessie obviously felt safe with Patrick, and it probably never occurred to her that there might be any risk in her chosen course of action. Child welfare, brought about by the appalling conditions in which the children of mainly working-class families were found, was the subject of increasing concern and regulation at this time. By 1884, parishes were permitted by law to separate illegitimate children from their mothers and place them in foster care, in the interests of both parties. And they did not shrink from enforcement. It was a big problem in Glasgow, and the exodus of children to other areas of the country and abroad was enormous. Such children were deemed to have been “rescued”. Interestingly, it was the bourgeois ideal of “family” that was used as a benchmark for assessing what was best for the child.

Whatever the truth of Jessie's abrupt departure from home, she and her husband ended up in Cardross happy and contented, her son went to the village school and the future seemed set fair until the hopes of these three people, not unreasonably expectant of