



WHEN ETHICS WAS OF LITTLE CONCERN TO MEDICAL PRACTICE. (RE)DISCOVERING CRONIN

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Abstract: *A. J. Cronin was a Scottish-born physician-turned-novelist whose professional experience undoubtedly left a mark on his literary works. The first half of the 20th century was a period of uncertainties in medical sciences, lack of standardised practice, the absence of guidelines for the treatment of various diseases, and, sometimes, scarcity of ethical guidelines in healthcare research or medical practice. A connoisseur of the British medical system, Cronin was able to identify its flaws and transpose them into his literary output. His novel *The Citadel* was screened a few months after the publication. This paper aims to identify and discuss some of the ethical problems that *The Citadel* motion picture of 1938 portrays.*

Keywords: *A. J. Cronin, *The Citadel*, medical practice, ethics*

Born in Scotland at the end of the 19th century, Archibald Joseph Cronin gained his medical degree from the University of Glasgow in 1919 after having served in the marine services during WWI. An ambitious young man, Cronin gradually advanced professionally from a country doctor in mining villages to a successful practitioner in London. Nevertheless, overwork left a mark on his health and he was forced to retire to the countryside, a life-changing event which gave him the impetus to turn to his desire to produce a novel. The process proved to be rather tedious, but his first book, *Hatter's Castle* (1931), was received with great success and made him never to return to the medical field. Another important literary output is *The Citadel*, a novel published in 1937, which includes many episodes from his life and experience as a physician.

The Citadel focuses on the life of Andrew Manson, a fresh graduate of Saint Andrews University, who struggles to become an accomplished and successful doctor, starting his medical career in Welsh mining villages and climbing the social ladder until he owns a private practice in London. If the novel can be called semi-autobiographical, it is because many of the episodes are utterly similar to Cronin's accounts in *Adventures in Two Worlds*, his autobiographical novel. Despite his secretary's insistence to produce and publish an autobiography, Cronin's refusal to do so is one of the greatest gaps in the history of English literature (Davies A.).

The novel is credited for the foundation of the NHS (Timmins; O'Mahony). Cronin was utterly enthusiastic when writing the book, he worked all day long with unprecedented compulsion (Mckibbin). Published in the United States of America as well, such was the success of *The Citadel* that filming began in the following year, a film that was the first in British cinema to depict the role of the medical profession (Dux). While the film is an adaptation of the novel, it does not fully cover the book in its entirety, it is a successful portrayal of it highlighting all the important aspects of the profession in interwar Britain. *The Citadel* was produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and directed by King Vidor (1894-1982) with Ian Dalrymple, Frank Wead, and Elizabeth Hill as scriptwriters. It had an exceptional cast starring Robert Donat (1905-1958), later winning an Academy Award, and Rosalind Russell (1907-1976) in the lead roles. King Vidor was asked to direct the film in January 1938, but was rather hesitant before his visit to Wales. Filming started in June 1938, that is only 9 months after the publication of the book, it took nine weeks to complete, and in November the same year *The Citadel* was on the silver screens in the US reaching the screens in Britain the following month.

After having achieved success in the theatre, Robert Donat, a British actor, combined both the stage and the screen in his career. His stardom was activated with the lead role in *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1934) and was gaining popularity and recognition in the US (Lowe). He was nominated by Cronin himself to play the role of Andrew Manson, the main character of the film. Donat had signed a contract with MGM for six films, including *The Citadel*, the filming of which was supposed to start on June 1st 1938 (Lowe). Donat was already suffering from asthma, but his talent and mellifluous and distinctive speaking voice (Lowe) prevailed and he was able to complete the project successfully. One year later, he won an Academy Award as the best actor of the year for the role in *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (Cohen). Rosalind Russell, chosen over Elisabeth Allan (Dux), and King Vidor were the only non-Britons involved in filming *The Citadel* (Russell & Chase).

The Citadel was a cornerstone in the film industry. No other film before it had unveiled so many controversial aspects of the medical profession because the British Board of Film Censors worked under very strict rules prohibiting the unfavourable display of the Royal Family and associated services, religious matters, foreign representatives, law and medical professionals. Colonel J. C. Hanna and Mrs Crouzet rejected some of the scenes, as such there were cuts in the final version of the film, but, while the scene is that of a surgery, the camera manages to render the surgeons bending over the operating table only making instruments visible to the audience but not the surgical procedure itself. The film was re-released in October 1946, a fact which emphasises the resounding success of it (Dux).

As previously mentioned, a film could not cover a novel entirely, but *The Citadel* motion picture displays the most important scenes of the book. Dux identifies four essential medical scenes: the stillborn baby that Manson brings back to life, an act that gives him self-confidence and reassurance that he is a skilled doctor, the amputation of a miner's arm carried out in the collapsing mine, Denny's surgery (Ralph Richardson) performed by Charles Every (Ivory being the character in the book) (played by Cecil Parker), a failure that leads to the death of Denny although it was supposed to be a simple operation, and Anna Orlando's operation (Mary Boland is the book character) (unlisted actress), a young patient, a medical act that is a success, but, because it is done by a non-professional, Richard Stillman (Percy Parson), with no medical degree, Manson is accused by the English Medical Union (Dux). The Union discusses removing Manson's name from the registry of medical professionals, and the film ends in an open way after Manson's speech in front of the Union evoking other great past personalities who were not professionals, but who made valuable scientific discoveries in medical fields.

This paper will investigate 8 scenes of *The Citadel* film, 1938, in terms of ethical issues. The first episode under discussion finds Andrew Manson, recently settled as Dr. Page's (Basil Gill) assistant, solving the first case in his medical career. Such is his enthusiasm about the

patient in Glydar Place number 7, that his diagnosis is rather uncertain. He prepares some nitre, which, according to Denny, assistant to another doctor in the village, “won’t hurt them [patients], won’t help them [...] Makes them feel they’re being treated. What do they say in the little red book? When in doubt, give spirit of nitre” (Vidor). The condition of the patient is typhoid fever which is an infectious epidemic disease caused a bacillus, *Salmonella typhi*. Vaccines against it had been developed before 1911, but antibiotic therapy only became available after 1948 (Marineli et al.). It is spread through contaminated water and both assistants discover more and more cases every day. The ethical issue that is raised here is the fact that nitre is administered orally, whereas vaccines are injected subcutaneously or intramuscularly, thus, nitre could never treat typhoid fever. Nitre administered to patients gave them the assumption that they were being treated, regarded as “mumbo-jumberry” by Denny (Vidor).

Under the given precarious hygienic conditions of 1924, the year of the book, fighting against an epidemic outbreak spread via drinking water was virtually impossible. The film brings onto the surface the naiveness of Andrew Manson, naiveness rooted in his attempt to contact the officials and ask for help regarding the infected sewer, and Denny’s pragmatism who proposes blowing the sewer up using dynamite stolen from the mine. While Andrew is rather reserved about such a decision, considering the fact that he may lose his licence to practise, Denny’s determination to put an end to the epidemic is the winning solution which forced authorities to build a new sewer. While Cronin’s inspiration for such an episode is unknown, typhoid fever outbreaks were not uncommon or unusual, he could have used at least two sources, one in Bath with 20 deaths in 550 cases (Davies W.), and one in California with 7 deaths (Geiger). Both of the events occurred long time before the publication of the book, 1849, and 1915.

Another episode build around ethical concerns is the case of Idris Howells (unlisted actor), a young pupil whose brother is suffering from measles and is in isolation at home. Against the rules of isolation to prevent the spread of highly contagious diseases, the other main character, Christine Barlow, the schoolteacher, makes the bold decision to have Idris in the class. Her choice is put down to the fact that children attending school received a daily ration of milk. Nevertheless, Manson points out the fact that it is a case of breach which must be reported. Similarly to Denny, Christine resorts to a pragmatic solution intelligently adapted to the concrete situation.

The next instance which brings ethical issues into the limelight finds Manson reviving a stillborn baby, the family’s first and long-awaited child, a service for which Manson receives a check as a token of appreciation. It should be remembered that Manson was working for Dr. Page, and, as an employee, he was entitled to wages and was not supposed to be paid directly by the patients. Despite the fact that Dr. Page was unable to work due to a past cerebral haemorrhage, he was still receiving payments as a result of Manson’s work. This is a two-sided problem: Manson receiving the money outside the business of Dr. Page, and the bank manager who informs Mrs. Page (Dylis Davis) about the amount that Manson deposited, breaching the manager-customer confidentiality and disclosing information to another client.

Probably the most significant and striking situation of professional ethics revolves around the practice of miners to gain certificates stating that they were unfit for work. Fake diagnoses were set by previous practitioners, but Manson refuses to fill out documents containing false information. The scene involves Ben Chenkin (Francis Sullivan), a type of representative of the miners, who forces Manson to issue a certificate stating that he is suffering from nystagmus. Chenkin declares that he has been suffering from nystagmus for 15 years and is reluctant to being examined. Manson’s refusal to release a certificate for Chenkin’s false condition leads to being threatened that “There are other doctors who will give me certificates if you won’t” (Vidor). Manson’s act results in the miners withdrawing from his list of patients, but it represents the character’s determination to practise medicine in line with the Hippocratic

Oath.

Nystagmus was a frequent condition of individuals working in poor lighting conditions (Fergus, Culpin). Prior to writing the novel, there had been reports of nystagmus in miners, and even pseudo-nystagmus cases (Fergus). If Cronin was aware of such a disease, it may well be because of his experience working in the mining villages, as well as his interest in ophthalmology and his intention to specialise in ophthalmic surgery (Davies A.). However, the ethical concern raised here is the certification of miners as unable to work but receiving their wages.

Another scene involving ethics occurs at Aberlaw Medical Aid Society Hospital where two of Manson's cases are hospitalised, the amputated miner and the atypical pneumonia, but he is refused access by dr. Llewellyn (Joss Ambler) who states that once admitted, a case goes onto his list and encourages Manson to renew the unfit for work certificates to avoid rage among the miners. Another brief scene here includes dr. Llewellyn showing Manson a cigarette case that he received as gratitude from a satisfied patient which implies that gift giving and receiving was common practice in the urban hospital setting. Nevertheless, this encourages Manson to start research work on the cough cases of the miners, research which is emboldened by his professor and which seems to be ground-breaking and promising in changes to industrial legislation.

Some explicitation may be necessary here. Cronin was appointed Inspector of the Mines in 1924 (Davies A.) and studied the medical regulations in the mines and the correlation between coal dust inhalation and pulmonary disease, reports that were later published. As such, based on his interest in the topic and his experience in the field, it was a rightful decision to include such details in the novel.

Once in London, Manson meets an old friend, Dr. Lawford (Freddy Hampton in the novel version) (played by Rex Harrison), and is asked to see Lady Raebank (Athene Seyler) suffering from wheezy diaphragm and admitted to the "most expensive snob nursing home in London" (Vidor). Manson's diagnosis "There's nothing whatever the matter with that woman's chest" (Vidor) is dissatisfactory to Lawford who contradicts Manson "It's a treasure chest. She owns half the gold mines in Rhodesia" and hands him a five-guinea cheque as the consultant's fee. The scene brings clarity to the unethical practices in the nursing home, overcharging patients who are not seriously ill, but keeping them hospitalised in order to extort as much money as possible.

Unethical and unprofessional acts succeed in the film: charging patients when they cancel appointments, using iridium lamps which do not treat but merely "bronze nicely" (Vidor), attending surgeries and receiving cheques, recommending needless tonsillectomies.

Culminating with the most striking scene that raises ethical concerns, the film displays the case of Mr. Stillman, the lung specialist whose intention was to become a biologist but "TB fascinated me. I drifted into it, developed my own methods. A degree seemed unnecessary" (Vidor). Stillman's invitation for Manson to see his apparatus is accepted. Manson removes Anna Orlando from the hospital where she is admitted and transfers her to Stillman's clinic. Manson and Stillman perform collapse surgery despite the nurse's insistence that performing a surgery with unqualified Stillman may end Manson's career. Manson takes the role of anaesthetist and the young girl with pneumothorax is saved. Collapse surgery with the use of a pneumothorax apparatus was introduced by Carlo Forlanini in 1882 and it involved pumping the chest cavity with filtered air via a long needle (Pezzella). Cronin may have been aware of the procedure at the time of writing *The Citadel*.

Nevertheless, despite saving the girl's life, Manson is brought to the English Medical Union for violating the code of the profession. In his defence, he elicits the names of Louis Pasteur, Paul Ehrlich, Waldemar Haffkine, Elie Metchnikoff, Robert Koch whose contributions to medical science are unrivalled and reminds the board of the Hippocratic Oath. Unlike the

book, in which Cristine dies in a car accident, the film ends with Christine and Andrew Manson walking out of the board room of the Union.

The ethical concern of this scene is how far a medical professional should go in order to save a patient's life. Working with unqualified Stillman was the wrong thing to do, but without his help and experience in the field of tuberculosis, Anna would have lost her life, just as Denny dies on the operating table as a consequence of Charles Every's unprofessional carelessness and lack of action, one of the most poignant scenes in the film.

Conclusion

A successful novel, *The Citadel*, was filmed just after a few months following its publication. A star-studded motion picture, the film brings onto the screen unprecedented medical practices and ethical concerns of interwar Britain. Based on the semi-autobiographical novel of A. J. Cronin, the film manages to portray captivating characters, realistic dialogues, and tremendous acting. It is a moving production which emphasises the realities of the age, the struggle of the main character, his ambition to become successful, but his determination to do what is best for the patient.

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