

# An auspicious debut

## *Gripping tale is rooted in Canadian history*

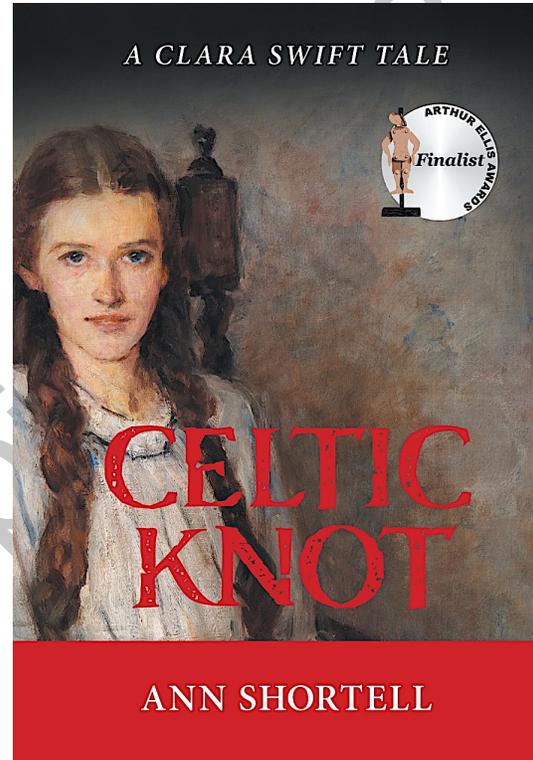
### *Suspended Sentences*

by Jim Napier

Toronto author Ann Shortell offers an eerie yet uplifting account of how she came to write a novel based on the assassination of Thomas D'Arcy McGee in the earliest days of Canadian confederation. Awakened from a bad dream, she scribbled down a note beginning with the compelling words "I was on the other side of the door when Mr. D'Arcy was shot." Convinced that her story had merit, she enrolled in an online fiction-writing course offered by Stanford University. Her judgment was validated when she became a finalist for the Crime Writers of Canada "Unhanged Arthur" Award for Best Unpublished Novel of 2017.

On April 7th, 1869, fifteen-year-old housemaid Clara Swift recalls the murder of her former master, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, exactly one year earlier. It is a difficult task for her to relive these events, but she has been asked to do so by none other than Sir John A. Macdonald, the Prime Minister of Canada, who is anxious that a true account of McGee's life, and of his death, be preserved for history.

She begins by recounting McGee's emigration from Ireland in 1848,



hounded for being a rebel. After settling in America he had come to realize that their system of government was also flawed, and did not offer the justice and peace of mind that he sought. But ironically, after moving to Canada in 1857, McGee found a British Colony in which Catholics enjoyed equal rights. Tempering his enthusiasm, he soon encountered the Fenian rebels; Irish nationalists, they had invaded Canada from the United States, hoping to bring British troops into the conflict.

But although Irish himself, McGee came to regard the Fenians as dangerous, and put his faith instead in the democratic system that the fledgling Canada was striving to establish. His Irish roots, combined with his opposition to the Fenians, caused them to condemn him as a traitor, and this is where the story picks up.

Following his election as a Member of Parliament, McGee and housemaid Clara Swift move to Ottawa. They settle in a boarding house at 71 Sparks Street, presided over by Mrs. Nancy Trotter and her son, Willy, who is a Parliamentary pageboy and an aspiring journalist.

Shortly after half-past two in the morning, on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1868, the silence in Mrs. Trotter's boarding house is abruptly shattered by the sound of a single gunshot. Clara opens the front door to find D'Arcy McGee lying on the doorstep. She summons help from inside, but it is too late. The only sign of his assailant is her fleeting glimpse of a carriage disappearing around a distant street corner.

Immediately following the attack there is an inquest and an autopsy. The word goes out to watch the railway lines and canal lock stations for signs of McGee's assailants, and the net begins to tighten. But just as a fishing net gathers all manner of creatures as it is hauled in, so the

investigation into D'Arcy McGee's murder extends its reach to include the famous and the infamous, victims and villains, the powerful and the powerless, and the Canadian political landscape became forever altered. Before it ends, political beliefs become fused with religious convictions, and all Irish people become the targets of public hatred. And although one man is sent to the gallows for the assassination of D'Arcy McGee, three other deaths remain to be reckoned in the final accounting.

Those who think Canadian history lacks drama will find, in *Celtic Knot*, a suspense-filled fictional tale that chronicles the impact of a singular event at a turning point in a young nation's development. It is a confident, meticulously researched, and superbly written tale. Shortell perfectly captures the language and atmosphere and ethos surrounding those momentous times. The panoply of intriguing characters paraded for the reader includes housemaids and barmaids, a parliamentary page who is an aspiring journalist, doctors and detectives and attorneys and judges—and, not least, the passionate nationalists whose fervent political beliefs were intricately woven into the fabric of the earliest days of Canadian confederacy. It is a tale that will not only appeal to students of history, but to anyone in search of a well-told, gripping story of murder and its aftermath.

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**Jim Napier** is a professional crime-fiction reviewer and novelist based in Canada. Since 2005 his book reviews and author interviews have been featured in several Canadian newspapers and on multiple websites. His own crime novel, *Legacy*, was

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published in April of 2017, while the second book in the series, *Ridley's War*, is slated for release in the Fall of 2018.

He can be reached at [jnapier@deadlydiversions.com](mailto:jnapier@deadlydiversions.com)

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