

Thomas D'Arcy McGee (1825-1868)



Thomas D'Arcy McGee, better known to Canadians as simply D'Arcy McGee, was a politician, journalist, poet, and historian who actually spent the majority of his life outside of Canada. He is known as one of the most eloquent Fathers of Confederation, and has since then gained notoriety for being one of the few Canadian politicians to ever be assassinated (on Sparks Street!).

D'Arcy McGee emigrated from Ireland to the US in 1842 when he was 17 years old. Two years later, he became the editor of the *Boston Pilot* newspaper while living in Massachusetts. In 1845, only a year after becoming the editor of the *Boston Pilot*, he returned to Ireland to edit the newspaper *Nation*, known for its nationalist (support of Irish independence from Great Britain) sentiment at a time when much of Ireland was bitterly divided about British rule. In 1848 he participated in a failed nationalist uprising in Ireland, and fled back to the US fearing for his safety.

For nearly 10 years after this event, McGee went back to editing newspapers. Throughout this time he was preoccupied with the plight of hundreds of thousands of Irish immigrants, and became increasingly discouraged by the lack of support for his initiatives in the US. He moved to Montreal in 1857 at the request of the Irish community there that took interest in his work, and he began another newspaper called *New Era*, which advocated for a "new nationality" for Canada, federated geographically, and freer from British interventions. He likewise called for nation-building initiatives like the construction of a transcontinental railway, settling the West, and more protectionist economic policies.

Thomas D'Arcy McGee was elected in Montreal to the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada in 1858 when he was 33 years old. He was a member of George Brown's Reform Party but broke off from them when they did not support his vision of national projects, and joined the much more supportive John A. Macdonald's "Great Coalition" leading up to Confederation. By 1866, many Irish voters felt he was more concerned with Canadian affairs than Irish ones, and Macdonald dropped him from Cabinet due to his unpopularity with his former supporters.

While McGee always sought for Irish independence from Britain, he was opposed to the Fenian movement in North America which planned to obtain Irish independence from Britain by violent revolution at home and by conquering Canada and holding it essentially for ransom.

Only a year after D'Arcy McGee played a prominent role in the founding of Canada, he was assassinated in the early morning hours on Sparks Street on Tuesday, April 7th, 1868. Within 24 hours Ottawa police arrested Irish nationalist Patrick James Whelan at a local hotel following a tip from the public. Searching through his belongings, they found numerous references to revolutionary-Irish ties and a revolver allegedly fired the previous day.

A trial began and despite the seemingly insurmountable evidence against Whelan, his defence lawyer poked many holes in the prosecution's case. Despite demonstrating numerous instances that raised reasonable doubt as to Patrick James Whelan's guilt, circumstantial evidence proved strong enough to find him guilty and he was sentenced to death. Up until his execution, Whelan strongly maintained his innocence, making D'Arcy McGee's assassination the "greatest murder mystery in Canadian political history." At present, it is still unknown who definitively assassinated McGee a week before his 43rd birthday, and it is highly encouraged that the reader look into some of the more interesting theories surrounding his death.