

Shamrock Struggles

*Anne Emery sets newest tale during **The Troubles***

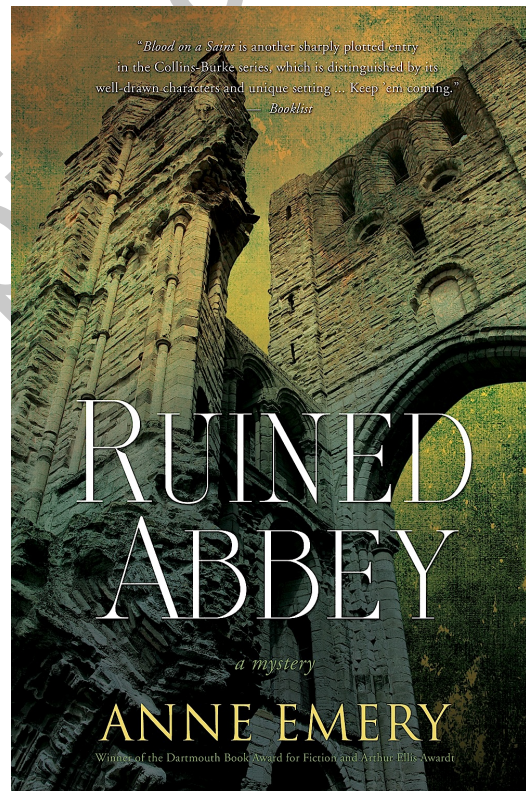
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

It's April of 1989, and this, the eighth in Anne Emery's Collins-Burke mystery series, finds Father Brennan Burke preparing to deliver Mass in his New York City parish when he receives an ominous phone call: his sister Molly has rung from London to tell him she's in prison, arrested for being a member of a "proscribed organization" – legalese for the IRA during those tumultuous times. All too aware of the British's treatment of Irish rebels, Brennan and his brother Terry immediately set out for London to see their elder sister.

The very next morning they visit Molly in prison, and the news is grim: she's suspected of being involved in a plot to bomb Westminster Abbey, and nearby, a policeman apparently responding to the scene had been murdered. Although they seem not to believe Molly was actively involved, Special Branch is certain that she has information about who was. It's not an unreasonable suspicion: stretching back generations, her family has long been actively involved in the quest for Irish independence. Moreover, Molly, a university academic, had recently delivered a paper railing against the abuses of the seventeenth-century militant Oliver Cromwell, who had been responsible for the deaths of many Irish during the English

Revolution. Although her talk had been offensive in and of itself, shortly thereafter the London police had received a threat to bomb a statue of Cromwell shortly before a memorial ceremony by his supporters.



When Special Branch is unable to make their case, they are forced to release Molly. Together with Brennan and Terry she makes for the nearest Irish pub to celebrate, where they are reunited with their cousin Conn. But the family is aware that they're being watched, and fear their conversations

are being monitored as well. Her fears are confirmed when, soon afterwards, two detectives from Special Branch visit Molly at home and question her closely about Conn.

Flashback to 1970, and the death of Molly's grandfather, Christy, also an Irish patriot: the mourners relive their treatment at the hands of the British, and the hatred for the British is palpable. On hand to witness the events is Finn, Molly's uncle, whose patriotism is already hardening as he listens to the mourners recount their harsh treatment at the hands of the Black and Tans. It is a moment that will influence events nearly twenty years later.

When the police arrest Conn for the death of the policeman and taking part in the plot to blow up Westminster Abbey, the family fears the worst, and it falls on Brennan to delve into the shadowy world of the IRA in an effort to free his brother. He fears that Finn may also be involved, and before long he wonders whether any member of the Burke family can escape the suspicions of the British authorities.

Anne Emery is a gifted storyteller and a conscientious historian, and shows once again why she is one of Canada's finest novelists. She meticulously documents the tensions between the Irish and the English leading up to the open conflict that has persisted for centuries. Her treatment is even-handed: advocates for both sides of the dispute will have no cause to complain that their side has not been fairly treated. And as readers will come away with a better understanding of the merits of both sides, they will also come to appreciate just why the Irish conflict proved for so many years to be so intractable. Emery has accomplished all this while still giving readers a well crafted and entertaining tale, in which she manages to include a finely-woven subplot involving a Special Branch officer who isn't quite what he seems, and a hint of romance that spans the two sides of what came simply to be known as The Troubles. All in all, *Ruined Abbey* is a literate and original tale rooted in the dark history of a complex people, one well worth reading.

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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com