

# **The Great Mistake, by Jonathan Lee**

*Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy*

Andrew Haswell Green, the 19th century New York City planner who was an integral force behind many institutions, is the subject of *The Great Mistake*, Jonathan Lee's engaging novel. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Central Park, and the New York Public Library all owe their existence to Andrew Haswell Green.

The novel's title is a nod to "great mistakes" associated with the "Father of Greater New York." Mr. Green's efforts to consolidate the existing boroughs into one city was derided as the "Great Mistake of 1898." His plan for Central Park was deemed a mistake as well. Although Mr. Green's life is little known today, his "mistaken" murder was notorious.

On Friday, November 13, 1903, 83-year-old Mr. Green was walking to his Park Avenue townhouse for lunch when a dapper man approached him. The man, insisting that Mr. Green knew him, kept muttering that he was "wronged by a woman." Despite the elderly gentleman's protestations, the intruder shot him dead in front of his housekeeper. Later identified as Cornelius Williams, the killer was quickly apprehended.

New York reporters dubbed the crime the "murder of the century," albeit the century was a mere three years old. Wild speculations ran rampant: "Was it a crime of passion, or a political assassination, or some kind of great mistake?" Given the murder victim's close ties to powerful politicians, particularly President Teddy Roosevelt, a scandal was feared. A homicide probe ensued, under the capable direction of Inspector McClusky.

The novel's chapters toggle between Inspector McClusky's investigation and flashbacks of Mr. Green's life. Born in 1820 to an unsuccessful Massachusetts farmer, Andrew Haswell Green advanced to become a lawyer under the tutelage of Samuel J. Tilden, the future Governor of New York. A lifelong bachelor, Mr. Green leads a private personal life.

On a tip, Inspector McClusky deduced that Bessie Davis, residing at 236 Central Park West, was the woman Cornelius Williams mentioned when he shot Mr. Green. Arriving at the mansion, McClusky was surprised that Bessie was not a servant, but "a woman implausibly rich, with a great many properties to her name, all from playing hostess to the supposed gentlemen of this city." McClusky ultimately solved the "mistaken-identity" case, and Andrew Haswell Green faded into history.

Today, there are few memorials to Andrew Haswell Green – a marble bench in Central Park and a portrait tucked away in City Hall. His vision, nevertheless, outlasted his fame: "Parks. Bridges. Great institutions. Art. They were the only forms of immortality Andrew ever imagined."

(Note: *The Great Mistake* is part of the Heritage Hills Library and Somers Library collections. For a list of new books at the Heritage Hills Library, please see page 9.)