

Joseph Fahey on The Campbell Conversations

By [Grant Reeher](#)



Onondaga County Court Judge Joseph Fahey speaks with Campbell Conversations host Grant Reeher. One of Syracuse's most intriguing mayors is Democrat James McGuire, who in 1896 bucked a Republican establishment to be elected into office, at just 26. This week on the Campbell Conversations host Grant Reeher talks with his biographer, Onondaga County Court Judge Joseph Fahey, about the mayor's times, his legacy, and his controversial activism on behalf of Irish independence.

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Grant Reeher (GR): Welcome to the Campbell Conversations. My guest today is Joseph Fahey. He's a judge in the Onondaga County Court System and an adjunct Law Professor at [Syracuse University](#). But the reason he is here with me today is that he is also the author of the book, *James K. McGuire: Boy Mayor and Irish Nationalist*, about Syracuse's Mayor from 1896 to 1901. Judge Fahey, welcome to the program.

Joseph Fahey (JF): Thank you for having me; it's a pleasure to be here.

GR: How did you come to the decision to write a book on James McGuire?

JF: It started as a project that was requested by the Irish-American Cultural Institute. They were going to do an anthology of Irish-American leaders in [Onondaga] County and they knew I was related to him so

they asked me to write a profile and I wrote the profile. They didn't do the anthology and I took it to the [American Conference](#) of Irish Studies in [New York](#) and delivered it as a paper down there and Jim MacKillop at Syracuse University Press was in the audience and went on to offer if I wanted me to write a biography and I agreed to do it.

GR: And what is the nature of your relation to him?

JF: He was my mother's uncle. He was my Great Uncle. My grandfather's older brother.

GR: So what made you want to actually devote all the time that you did to write the book? I mean, you were solicited for it, but in this time and place of your life, what made you decide you were going to do this?

JF: From the profile, I thought he was a pretty fascinating character in so many chapters of his life. Both as a mayor of Syracuse—he was pretty prominent on the national stage in Democratic politics and state-wide politics and then he would become a very close confidant of Eamon de Valera's [Irish nationalist and president of Ireland]. And he was involved in the Irish independence movement both above and below the radar screen. So I thought he was pretty interesting and I wanted to learn more about him.

GR: I want to come back to some of those things that you just mentioned but tell me how you went about researching his life.

JF: It was quite an undertaking because he didn't leave any papers or diaries or correspondence or anything behind. So I wound up going into the archives of City Hall and copying some of the correspondence from his administration. I spent probably a couple of years of [nights and weekends](#) in the local history section of the library and I pretty much had a day by day account of his six years as mayor of Syracuse. I was able to access the American-Irish Historical Society's archives and then I was able to get cooperation from Congressman Walsh about the Congressional investigations he was involved in and the archivist at Eamon de Valera's papers in Ireland were very helpful too. So in the end I was able to put together a pretty good picture of his life.

GR: Now why did he not leave anything of his own?

JF: I think because he had, what I call this above the radar, below the radar existence. He was involved in a very secret organization called Clan-na-Gael that raised money for the Irish Republican brotherhood. He was involved in some gun running activities of his own, and I think that because he had this sort of clandestine wall of his life he deliberately didn't keep these things.

GR: I read in your book that as a boy, McGuire was sent to German School because they had the best reputation at the time. But that the instruction was in German. How common was that then in the schools?

JF: I don't know exactly how common it was at that point. I mean the schools he went to were really offered by the Lutheran Churches on the North side. He became fluent in German and he actually could campaign in German, he could talk to the German audiences in their native tongue, which was pretty effective at that time.

GR: And what struck me about reading that was when it came to education, this notion of English as the universal language, the politics that we hear today [regarding] that, had not taken hold, in at least in instruction.

JF: No, there didn't seem to be this nativist approach to things. But ultimately when he finished his grammar [school education](#), he and my grandfather went to the early version of CBA [Christian Brothers Academy] and I think that was taught in English and that was their last formal schooling.

GR: I'm Grant Reeher and I'm speaking with Judge Joe Fahey, the author of a biography of Syracuse Mayor James McGuire. You described how in the book as a young man,

persuasive [public speaking](#) emerged as one of his primary skills. Aside from being Irish, what gave James McGuire that skill?

JF: That's a good question, it really is. Because when he died he was considered to be at that point the greatest orator the county [of Onondaga] had ever produced. His mother was very involved in continuing his education even after he had to leave to support the family and she home-schooled him and homeschooled him very well. Forced him to read the classics. He had a pretty inquisitive mind and I think he just had the [natural speaking](#) ability.

GR: And how did he make his living before he was elected mayor?

JF: He had started actually as a stock clerk at Bradford and Kennedy which was a dry goods business here in the city of Syracuse and worked his way up to becoming a partner in the firm. He accomplished that by the time he was in his early twenties. My grandfather was the same way; he formed his own [insurance agency](#) at the age of nineteen. So he was pretty successful, he had a pretty good head for business too.

GR: And you mentioned earlier that this German that he learned came in handy on the campaign trail. Tell me about the campaign more generally, how did he go about running for Mayor?

JF: He had actually been approached by the Democratic Party before he was 21 years old to run for school commissioner and [state] assemblyman and he declined both nominations. And after he was responsible, as was my grandfather, to support the family because of my great grandfather's depression after one of the kids drowned--and so after my great grandfather died and he established himself in business, he decided to run for mayor. And he ran an insurgent campaign--got the nomination of the Democratic side as an insurgent and then ran against a divided Republican party.

GR: And you have some really interesting descriptions of the media coverage of the campaign, in which you can see the future of the Syracuse newspapers. Can you tell me a little bit about how the mass media worked at that time?

JF: Syracuse actually had twelve newspapers that came out multiple times a day and each of the Republican factions had kind of their house organ; The *Syracuse Standard* was one. The Democratic house organ would have been the *Syracuse Courier* and the campaigns were largely conducted through the newspapers. There were some rallies and some speeches, but their position papers and their broadsides and their attacks on one another largely occurred in the media.

GR: When he becomes mayor, going by your description, he sounds to me like a pretty activist mayor in terms of what he had accomplished--all the things that he did in the six years that he had in office. He particularly was a builder; you write that he was responsible for 38 schools during his three term tenure--a term was two years back then--and also responsible for a lot of street paving which was very significant back then in terms of economic development. In addition to being a key figure in the first Everson Museum and the Carnegie Library among other places.

JF: Yes.

GR: So tell me a little bit about what informed that nature of his approach to being a mayor?

JF: I think he had always recognized from having to leave school as a child the value of education. But he also saw that if you didn't invest in education, especially in the aftermath of the Panic of 1893; you are going to have pretty devastated, depressed homeless people in the city, and he was very concerned about that. He was very concerned about offering constructive programming even in the Onondaga County penitentiary. I think he really placed a real value on education and he had a special love for the library--he was a trustee of the library before he was mayor. That was the only other public office he ever held.

GR: And I was curious about this in regard to the education as to how much of this impulse to build and to create this additional educational infrastructure--was the impulse of the time, in terms of the city's development, or was this really his initiative pushing this forward?

JF: I think it was a combination of both things, I think that the city was at the developmental stage where this was going to be necessary to have the extensive kind of school system that they have. But he did have, I mean, his devotion to education was such that he and my grandfather were able to put their two younger siblings through Notre dame which was pretty unusual at the turn of the last century. So they really did see the value of education.

GR: And of these 38 schools, are any of them still with us today?

JF: I think some of them are. I know that ironically one of the older ones is now a Senior Citizen's housing project on the north side named after my father. But some of the older schools I think are still around. Now whether they are still functioning schools or just various community centers or Senior Citizen's housing; I'm not sure about that.

GR: Now in those days too, all across the country and in urban centers, ethnic politics was really big. Did he as mayor try to create patronage for Irish-Americans? How did the Irish aspect play out?

JF: He did create patronage for the Irish but I have to say about McGuire, he created patronage for anybody who was for him. So he didn't discriminate along ethnic lines. If you were German or if you were Irish or you were, he would find something for you.

GR: What were the big ethnic divisions at that time that he might have been dealing with in Syracuse?

JF: I would say that it was largely a division between the White Anglo Saxon Protestant population and the ethnic groups, the Irish and the Germans. And the Jewish community was very involved in politics to a lesser degree, the Italian-American community. One of the interesting things about him was he was the first Democrat to get the endorsement of the only African-American newspaper at that time, because he had acknowledged that they had not been well treated by prior city administrations. So there was a certain patronage side of that too in the sense that he was looking for votes, but he did reach out to that community and he did get support from them.

GR: Now you're a Democrat, this gentleman was a Democrat--are Faheys all Democrats? Some Are McGuires all Democrats?

JF: Yeah, we are. Somebody once said to me that he wondered if I was going to become a Republican and I said that if there is going to be a Republican Fahey someday it will be somebody other than me.

GR: I'm talking with Onondaga County Court Judge Joseph Fahey and we have been discussing his new book, titled *James K. McGuire: Boy Mayor and Irish Nationalist*. McGuire was Syracuse's Mayor around the turn of the 20th century.

When I read your book I came across some iconic characters whose names are still with us today in the city, on buildings and other important things--Hendricks, Hancock, Kirk, Matty, others of that nature. Do you think it says anything, as a metaphor perhaps, that we don't seem to have the same number of names like that from the last thirty years permanently etched into the Syracuse infrastructure?

JF: I think there is a lot of validity to that. The last major structure that I can think of that was named after a former public office holder was Corcoran High School, and that was built in 1967. It may be that there is

a lack of new construction, so the opportunity to name things isn't quite there. But I thought that was kind of ironic.

The other thing that I found kind of unusual is for a guy who built 38 school buildings, there is no building in Syracuse named after McGuire. And I think that had to do with the fact that for the next forty or fifty years after he was mayor there was no Democratic administration. I think they were always worried that he would come back and run for mayor again, so they tried to freeze him out of existence. They [even] named one school after the Republican Commissioner of Jurors – Salem Hyde, but no McGuire High school, no McGuire Elementary school

GR: That's telling. What ultimately defeated him as Mayor?

JF: I think there was a certain amount of McGuire fatigue. You know he had three terms. He seemed to acknowledge that his focus had become devoted to running for governor, and that became a distraction from Syracuse, and he thought that hurt him with the Syracuse populous. And then the Republicans, they indicted him in the middle of his second term and created a legislative committee that took all the city's prior debt and put it all into one budget, raising the tax rates, so they worked pretty hard to defeat him.

GR: Was that a legitimate indictment? You hear today a phrase, "the criminalization of politics" that being, if you want to get someone on the other side you'll try to figure out something you can bring charges about.

JF: It was a classic example of that. He tried to become a candidate for governor in 1898. He lost the nomination at the Democratic State convention to Augustus Van Wyck. Then Wyck was defeated by 17,000 votes, and the Democrats recognized if they had run McGuire they would have won. He would have defeated Theodore Roosevelt for governor. Roosevelt appointed a special prosecutor within the next year to come to Syracuse to investigate finances and had him indicted.

GR: So let me move on to post-mayor activities. He was a strong proponent of Irish independence, you mentioned that earlier, and that led him to advocate that the U.S. should side with the Germans in World War I, because the Germans were backing the Irish rebels, among other reasons. And he wrote some well known and controversial books at that time-- *The King, The Kaiser and Irish Freedom* and *What Germany Could Do for Ireland*. And he also housed and supported Irish rebels, as you mentioned earlier. Did he ever rethink any of those positions before his death in 1923, after World War I?

JF: I don't think he ever rethought those positions; he surely didn't apologize for them. What he did say – because he did become a subject of the congressional investigation and the propaganda at the conclusion of World War I. And his position was that at the time, [because] America had entered the War on the side of the British, he would pull his books from the market. He raised money for the American and British war effort, and was a loyal American, but up to the point where America was entering the war he felt that the Irish would do better if Germany prevailed over Britain.

GR: Now as his biographer, what do you make of those decisions that he took?

JF: I don't think they were out of the mainstream for the Irish Fenian Movement at that time. I think that one of the reasons the League of Nations went down to defeat was because the Irish-American Community became so well-organized, because they recognized that Ireland would not do well under the League of Nations, that the question of Irish sovereignty would be left to the British. And you have to remember that from the day of the 1916 rising, the Irish republicans and the Irish-Americans viewed Ireland as a republic, not as a colony of Britain. So I don't think he would ever apologize for those

positions. I don't think his positions were out of the mainstream for the Irish-American leadership at that time.

GR: That's interesting because what you have got there in a way is you are putting the interests of the Irish question above the American question in terms of World War I. At least that was articulated. Once we come into the war, and obviously who we were backing and who our allies were, if you think about that through the lens of the politics today, that would be a really really chancy kind of move to make.

JF: It would and it was. Wilson so loathed Irish-American leadership that he turned the forerunner of the FBI loose, and a number of them were charged with sedition and treason. Teddy Roosevelt recommended they all be interned in World War I.

GR: I also wanted to ask you a couple of questions about your day job.

JF: Sure.

GR: You're a judge in the Onondaga County court system. How long have you sat on the bench and what kinds of cases typically come before you?

JF: I've been on the bench since January 1st of 1997, and I have handled almost exclusively felony level criminal cases. I also handle annual reviews of civilly committed sex offenders under Article 10 of the mental hygiene law. But I would say ninety percent of my work is presiding over criminal trials.

GR: And are there any particular insights about law or society that this experience of being a judge has given you?

JF: I still believe that probably the greatest thing that we can do to avoid young people falling into lives of crime is to educate them and train them in ways that they can enter the workforce productively. H.G. Wells once said that history was a race between education and catastrophe, and I think that holds true from what I see on the bench every day.

GR: Well you're sounding like James K. McGuire, I think. The focus on education (laughs). Now I know you are limited on what you can say about individual cases, but I was curious to know whether there are cases that stick in your mind and where you look back and think "well you know we may have gotten that one wrong".

JF: I can't really think of anything that I would look at and say that it came out wrong. When I was teaching at the law school I always used to tell my students, "juries never make mistakes. Judges make mistakes, lawyers make mistakes, cops make mistakes, witnesses make mistakes but the jury is pretty good about putting their collective heads together and coming up with the right results." Maybe they heard something they shouldn't have, or maybe they didn't hear something they should have, but I think juries do a great job and I can't really point to any case that I have had in sixteen years and say I think it should have come out differently.

GR: I'm also thinking about the criminal justice system itself. If you could change one thing about it, that it's actually possible to imagine it might change, what would it be?

JF: I think I would probably say it would be wise to give judges more discretion over non-violent cases in which drugs and alcohol are a problem, to offer more treatment options that are out there. I think we are starting to see a lot of good work done in those areas but I'm not sure if we'll ever keep up with the number of cases coming through.

GR: My impression was that Syracuse actually has done some things about that. Tell me a little bit more about it.

JF: Yeah, we have a treatment court and cases can go into that, either being diverted into treatment court at the beginning of the case or sometimes what can happen is a defendant will plead guilty to an offense and then have the case transferred to treatment court. It's a carrot and stick approach. If they are successful they get further consideration, if they are not then they get sentenced accordingly. I just wished we had done that sooner. I wish the New York state legislature had reformed the drug laws sooner, because I think that there was a whole generation of people that went off to state prison because of laws that were utterly too harsh when it came to drugs.

GR: We'll come back to the book again with just a couple of quick things. Is there an upcoming book launch for your biography of James McGuire that you want our listeners to know about?

JF: Yes there is. The Onondaga Historical Association and the Irish-American cultural institute are going to host a book launch at the Onondaga Historical Association on May 21st, from 4:30-6, and it is open to the public. I hope everybody will come.

GR: Great--and has this experience of writing this book whetted your appetite for future book projects?

JF: It has, yeah. I do enjoy writing. I enjoyed writing as a judge and as a professor and I now kind of branched out to different areas of Irish and Irish-American history, and I enjoy reading, researching and seeing if there is enough material to do something.

GR: Let me get to the three questions. What is the title of the chapter of life that you are currently living?

JF: I would call it chapter one of the second edition, Fahey Revisited.

GR: Second, what's your worst trait?

JF: I get terribly impatient with people that I don't think are performing well in front of me.

GR: And finally, what professional or creative achievement in your life so far has surprised you the most?

JF: That in my 64th year I'm taking piano lessons.

GR: That was Joseph Fahey and the book again is titled *James K. McGuire: Boy Mayor and Irish Nationalist*. Judge Fahey, thanks so much for talking with me.

JF: Thank you so much for having me.

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