

McGuinness of Greenpoint

BY GEOFFREY COBB



Photo:

Peter J. McGuinness was born in Greenpoint in 1888, the third of fourteen children. As a political leader, city official, and Alderman representing the Fifteenth Assembly District, he was a fighter for the interests of people in Greenpoint. He sought, among other things, restoration of ferry service to Manhattan, construction of a new subway line, a new bridge over the Newtown Creek, a bridge connecting Brooklyn and Queens, several playgrounds, and a huge swimming pool for McCarren Park. Courtesy of Geoffrey Cobb.

Peter J. McGuinness (1888–1948) was a highly successful Irish-American Brooklyn Democratic politician who, in the 1930s and 1940s, was a living anachronism. After World War II, when Tammany Hall was dying out and reform and fusion were the new political forces reshaping New York City politics, McGuinness ruled his ward as the last Tammany-Hall style ward boss in the city. His nearly thirty years of political rule in Greenpoint were a product of old-school Democratic machine politics that he learned as a local boy and as a teenager in the Bowery watching Tammany Hall sachem, Big Tim Sullivan.

Though McGuinness utilized certain elements of Tammany machine tactics, he was also a radical departure from Tammany corruption, and his ability to convince voters of his honesty allowed him to survive when Tammany politicians could not. His rule in Greenpoint has often been unfairly compared to other machine politicians, but McGuinness' unprecedented hold on political power and

enduring popularity were unique. He understood that the key to political power was to provide honest service to local constituents, and no politician ever was more attentive to the needs of his constituents than McGuinness.

In a profile in the *American Mercury* magazine in 1933 Peter Pringle called McGuinness, “The last of a noble line.” He compared McGuinness to the modern politician whose speeches were written for him and who had nothing really to say. Pringle said that he belonged to “An older almost vanished school” and noted that McGuinness had “no guile, trickery or deceit.” (*American Mercury*, p.435) He spoke his mind and he spoke on any topic under the sun. He relied on his gut instincts and said exactly what he thought. McGuinness flourished in the days before focus groups determined what a politician said or did not say. What he said for years resonated with his Greenpoint constituents.

Even in the late 1940s, when the *New Yorker* did a long profile on McGuinness,

the reporter was taken aback by what a throw-back McGuinness was to the bygone Tammany sachems. He was a large powerful man who physically resembled old time Irish ward bosses. Like Tammany ward bosses his speech was that of the working class, and he had a large booming voice like the Tammany chiefs of the past. Even his physical appearance reminded the *New Yorker* writer of Tammany sachems:

McGuinness is an anachronism. His approach to politics was outdated before he was born. His language went out along with cops in jardiniere hats. His face seems improbable in the mid-twentieth century. Newspaper cartoonists say they can get a perfect caricature of the old-time boss by drawing the contemporary McGuinness true to life, which in fact seems larger than life. Nast and Keppler, they maintain, never created anything half so plausible as McGuinness. (Rovere, p. 21)

GROWING UP IN GREENPOINT

McGuinness came of age in the day before most politicians were college-educated men. He never went to high school, but he had made up for his lack of formal education with shrewdness, charm, and an unbelievable wit. He was a larger-than-lifer figure who had huge charisma, but also an innate sense of the needs of his constituents and a genuine concern for their well-being.

Much of McGuinness' success was due to his being so similar to his constituents. McGuinness was the son of a foreman in a brass factory. One of fourteen children, McGuinness grew up in Greenpoint, one of the most heavily industrialized areas in the world. His constituents were the working class and were often waterfront hands or factory workers who also had little formal education. He even spoke like them and took pride in his working-class Brooklynese speech.

Greenpoint was one of the most heavily Democratic areas of the city during McGuinness' life, and people took a huge interest in local political contests. There were



fifteen active Democratic clubs in the neighborhood and even minor elections were hotly contested. Greenpoint campaigns were passionate affairs and tensions often ran high. Successful local politicians were often large tough men like McGuinness, who stood six feet two and often weighed two-hundred and seventy pounds. Street oratory was how votes were won, and the politician who could shout down not only hecklers but also opponents won elections. McGuinness related how, as young men, opponents in political contests threw spoiled fruit and vegetables as well as soaked loaves of bread from rooftops in working-class Greenpoint.

McGuinness was not just born with the physical build to be a blue-collar politician, he also had the personal skills needed to succeed in elections. By the time he was seven he knew everyone in his neighborhood, and all his life he had an amazing ability to recall names and faces. When he was just eight-years old he began his career in local politics. Young Pete was charming and extremely gregarious person who could make people laugh. The local ward captain, realizing that the boy had the ability to get out the vote, tapped him to remind people in his district to vote. McGuinness turned out between thirty and forty voters to cast ballots for William Jennings Bryant, an achievement that an adult might have been envious

Photo:

Greenpoint is a densely populated, heavily used neighborhood in northern Brooklyn. Once a richly verdant area, by the mid-nineteenth century it was changing from agricultural to industrial activities. By the early twentieth century, industries operating there included shipbuilding, oil refineries, printing, glassworks, and foundries. During McGuinness' political career, the population was largely working-class Irish, German, and Polish families. Courtesy of Geoffrey Cobb.

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of. McGuinness' love of politics was born and as a young man, long before he could vote, he was active in his local Democratic Club, the Jefferson Club, where he was given the job of election-day messenger and later ward captain.

When McGuinness was fourteen in 1902 he found work in the Bowery delivering cigars to the local saloons in the area. The saloons were de-facto political clubs and were all under the control of the "King of The Bowery," Big Tim Sullivan, who made sure that anyone hired in a bar in his area was loyal to him. Sullivan must have met the young McGuinness and given him his approval.

THE INFLUENCE OF BIG TIM

McGuinness and Sullivan shared many similarities in addition to their Irish-Catholic roots and their intimidating bulk. Both had started out as newspaper boys, and both men had known poverty as children. The two men also worked from their childhoods to support younger siblings. They were both generous men who had concern for the poor, probably because both could remember want and deprivation. Both saw their roles as district leaders involving help to the poor and both men reached into their own pockets to aid needy constituents.

McGuinness observed how Sullivan ran the local machine and won the loyalty of voters. He would later emulate many of the Sullivan techniques when he became political boss of Greenpoint. Sullivan understood one fact of political life in New York City perfectly well. He understood that running the Bowery was a profession and his power was dependent on the perceived benefits of his constituents. He knew he had to work to help his constituents. Sullivan summed up the situation: "When you get down to brass tacks it's the work that does the business." (Welch, p. 47) One of the keys to McGuinness' enduring success was the work he did every night in his political clubhouse. He would meet with his constituents and try to solve their personal problems. McGuinness' services included legal advice, interceding with judges and the police, helping to find jobs, securing government

benefits, cajoling landlords, playing the role of family court judge, and a host of others.

Sullivan's machine might have been corrupt, but it served the people at a time when there was no safety net. The machine offered jobs, legal support, social events, fuel, food, and shelter if necessary. The emerging machine itself was a profession. Party leaders wanted three things: votes, spoils and power. Tammany Hall survived countless scandals because it did not merely take: it gave back to an impoverished community. McGuinness' club, The Greenpoint People's Regular Democratic Club would be incredibly similar to Sullivan's lower East Side club, and McGuinness internalized the lessons about service and maintaining power Sullivan expressed.

One feature of the Sullivan machine McGuinness most likely brought back to Greenpoint was Christmas dinner. Sullivan reached into his own pocket to host Christmas dinner for literally thousands of his poorest constituents. The constituents were not only fed, but the fathers were given work boots and the children were given toys. McGuinness' club also distributed a huge amount of free food to the poor during McGuinness' Christmas parties, especially during the Depression where by some estimates half the population was out of work. In 1932 his club distributed as many as two-thousand baskets to the poor, and in many cases these baskets literally were the only food many of the Greenpoint poor had at Christmas. McGuinness said, "I came face to face with conditions of poverty in Greenpoint there are more than a thousand people who are on the point of actual hunger." (McGuinness, Collected Papers, vol.9, p. 145)

Neither Sullivan nor McGuinness condemned the poor. They saw them as victims and not as morally deficient. McGuinness once responded to the claim that Greenpoint had the most poverty among surrounding sections of the city:

*God must have loved the poor people
if he centered them all in Greenpoint.
While my folks are poor they are honest.
Why shouldn't the garden spot suffer. It is
the second largest district for factories*

and industry in the country. Well the depression hit business and them places shut down So with no work the people in GP are up agin it. (McGuinness, Collected Papers, vol.9, p. 187)

HIS RISE TO POWER

Although McGuinness admired and emulated Sullivan, his rise to political power was very different. The Whyos, a lower East Side street gang aided Sullivan who was also helped by his ownership of bars. Quickly, Tammany Hall recognized Sullivan's ability to attract votes and convinced him to join its ranks. Much of Sullivan's power derived from his close links to gamblers and other criminal elements, as well as from the Tammany organization. Sullivan used gang members to vote often as paid "repeaters" as well using them to intimidate opponents away from the polls. Sullivan's rise to power was as much a result of dirty politics as his own genuine popularity.

McGuinness rose to power in a completely different manner. His rise to power was honest and, instead of being embraced by the political machine, he ran against it. McGuinness was fed up with the graft and corruption that he saw in Greenpoint as well as the machine's indifference to the plight of the common people in Greenpoint. McGuinness, unlike Sullivan, was a true reformer who had nowhere near the amount of ties to the underworld that Sullivan had.

McGuinness's entire political career was unlikely. McGuinness returned to Greenpoint from the Bowery and started working as a stevedore in Orr's lumber yard in 1908. Unlike Sullivan, and highly unusual for a longshoreman, McGuinness never drank alcohol. McGuinness first political activity began four years later when he became part of a group called "The Native Borns," which was an anti-immigrant group that his enemies later charged was designed to kick the Poles out of Greenpoint.

Much of the political support that propelled McGuinness into power came from his fellow longshoremen at Orr's. One incident gave birth to his rapid rise in the Local 955 of



the local longshoremen's union which, it was reported, McGuinness recounted years later:

"It was at a meeting of the local in Germania Hall," Pete recounted. "I was in the Gents' Room. I was sitting down. These two [union] delegates come in and start talking. They don't know no one is there. I'm a son of a bitch, they're divvying up one hundred thirty-two bucks they just took in dues. The sweats running down me back. I pull up me pants and go for them. I flang one of them through a glass panel door and knocked (out) the other cold. Then I marched them into the room where the Lumber Handlers was. Me and a friend made them empty their pockets on the table. They come up with a hundred and fifty. I made a motion we teach them a lesson by using the other eighteen for beer and bologna

Photo:

Big Tim Sullivan, at left, was born in 1862 and began work as a newsboy and shoe shiner. His entrepreneurial and organizing skills caught the attentions of political leaders, and he became official Tammany leader of Manhattan's heterogeneous Third Assembly District when he was appointed by Tammany Boss Richard Croker in the 1890s. He maintained a reliable political machine in the District and kept it operating smoothly for years. Courtesy of Richard W. Welch.



sandwiches for the whole local. Me friend seconded it, and it passed unanimous.” (Rovere, p.23)

Photo:

McGuinness was a large man who, in his younger years, had been a bouncer, a middleweight boxer, and a teamster. Time magazine once characterized him as “an enormous man with an enormous voice... [and] the bearing of a Roman Emperor.” Courtesy of Geoffrey Cobb.

Both McGuinness and Sullivan were politicians in areas where the Irish- American and native born populations were shrinking. Part of the key to Sullivan’s success was his ability not only to reach out to the large Jewish and Italian populations of his district, but also to incorporate these groups into his political machine. While McGuinness sought to downplay his role in the Native Borns and deny the group’s xenophobic intentions, nevertheless the Polish population continued to claim that he did not reward them with jobs in proportion to their size, and his opponents repeated the charge. McGuinness certainly never enjoyed the warm relations that Sullivan did with other ethnic groups.

MCGUINNESS & WORLD WAR I

McGuinness owed his political career in large part to World War I. Prior to the War McGuinness tried to run for alderman as an independent Democrat and lost badly. In

1919 after the War he was elected alderman, defeating William McGarry, the choice of the Brooklyn Democratic machine of John McCooey, because his activities on the home front in Greenpoint made him much more popular. In 1917 when the United States entered the war the xenophobic Native Borns were transformed into “The Greenpoint Patriotic League” under McGuinness’ leadership. McGuinness was not yet thirty years old, but he astutely recognized the power of patriotism and he played on it masterfully.

McGuinness claimed that the Democratic Party’s district leader, boss James McQuade was not doing enough to boost the morale of Greenpoint’s soldiers. He ordered his followers to canvass the neighborhood for money to buy presents for the men going off to war. Naturally, this was a popular cause. The drafted men entrained for camp in public. Whenever a batch of Greenpoint boys left, they were given a send-off by McGuinness and his partisans, carrying the banners of McGuinness organizations, and by the Full Military Brass Band of Professor William J. Connolly, a musician who was one of McGuinness’s most important political allies. McGuinness would borrow a white horse from Orr’s, and he would ride regally and majestically at the head of the farewell parade

The local draft board was run by his childhood friend John MacCrate, and Pete found out the names of the local boys who were going off to war, sat down with the draftee and the soldier’s family and re-assured the apprehensive parents. McGuinness presented each draftee with a bon voyage package containing food, cigarettes, soap, razor blades, and an inspirational leaflet by McGuinness himself. The Patriotic League continued to send packages to the soldiers even when they were stationed in France, and many grateful soldiers wrote letters home to the local newspaper, the *Greenpoint Star*, thanking the Patriotic League and casting McGuinness’s work in a positive light.

After the War Pete formed an organization to help local boys re-enter the job market. These men and their families felt sincerely

grateful to Pete and later they would become some of his staunchest supporters. McGuinness decided to attack the local political machine for its inactivity and failure to effect positive local changes. In 1918 McGuinness took the unusual step of supporting MacCrate in his bid for Congress, even though MacCrate was a Republican. He encouraged MacCrate to enter the Democratic primary, and his childhood friend won in a divided contest.

Part of the reason MacCrate amassed so many votes in a heavily Democratic district was that McGuinness managed the campaign for his friend. He charged that the sitting Congressman was missing a huge number of votes on the floor of the House, tarring him with the name "Vanishing Joseph Flynn." MacCrate's election to Congress was a shock to the local political machine, but there was far more to come.

The following year McGuinness himself ran for alderman against the candidate of the

campaign showed an understanding of the power of the media that older ward politicians never had. The press was his first forum. Every time he learned of a new grievance, he wrote a letter to the local newspaper blaming McQuade and his organization. A local writer who would later become his co-leader, Julia Conlon, aided him in writing these letters. McGuinness held McQuade responsible for Greenpoint's lack of playgrounds and schools, for the deplorable condition of its pavements, for the reeking pollution from the factories, for the stench in Newtown Creek, for gypsy encampments, and for the fact that livestock was being herded through the streets of Greenpoint. "These animals," he wrote of the cattle in passage to slaughter, "knock over baby carriages with babies in them, and they knock down Greenpoint mothers, and the bulls kick them and knock them down, running into store windows and kicking them and breaking them. Why does Greenpoint have to put up



district leader, James McQuade. The odds seemed heavily stacked against McGuinness. The incumbent not only had patronage, but he had the backing of the Brooklyn Democratic leader, McCooley.

However, McGuinness ran a masterful campaign. He began his attack on the McQuade machine by blaming it for Greenpoint's pollution, lack of civic improvements, and declining real estate values. His

with this? What's our dude leader Jim McQuade and his alderman and his assemblyman doing to stop these beasts?" Other neighborhoods, he complained, were getting public baths and showers, but Greenpoint, which lacked indoor sanitation, was not. "What's the matter with Park Avenue Jim McQuade?" he demanded to know.

"Don't he think his own people are good enough to have baths and showers? What we need around here is fighting leaders. Why shouldn't Greenpoint be right up there with Flatbush and places like that?" (Rovere, p.37)

McGuinness pretended to be scornful of politicians in general and presented himself as an outraged private citizen who had been driven to action by the ineptitude of the political establishment. "I have to laugh," he wrote to

Photo:

An early view of the McCarren Park Pool in Greenpoint. The pool was built during McGuinness' political career and was constructed by the Works Progress Administration in 1936. As originally designed it could hold, at one time, 6800 swimmers. Closed in 1984, it was re-designed and re-opened in 2012. Courtesy of New York City Department of Parks & Recreation.

the editor of another Greenpoint newspaper, the *Weekly Star*; “when I think of these big bluffs of politicians coming into this district around election time, getting on the platform

was frank and naturally exuberant; McQuade was inclined to be sly and lugubrious. Nevertheless, McQuade was a reasonably popular leader and was powerfully entrenched.

Photo:
Peter McGuinness referred to Greenpoint as the “garden spot of the world,” and sponsored in McCarren Park garden projects where children from Greenpoint and other Brooklyn neighborhoods could grow their own vegetables. Courtesy of New York City Department of Parks & Recreation.



and telling the people what they will give them, and when elected you will never see the old blowhards again. If you ask me, all this is Mr. McCooey’s work. Now, I say, let Mr. McCooey and his officeholders refuse us these improvements, and we’ll show them what Greenpoint can do. Who is this McCooey, anyway? Does anyone ever see him around Greenpoint? Our motto here should be Greenpointers work for Greenpoint.” (Rovere, p.38)

McGuinness made district leader McQuade the issue, even though he was running against Alderman McGarry. McGuinness compared favorably to McQuade in many respects. McQuade was a short, squat, and essentially dull Irish-American who spent most of his time at the race tracks and in the saloons of Greenpoint, places that McGuinness never patronized. McGuinness

Most expected McQuade’s candidate McGarry to prevail. In the Democratic primary, McGuinness won by fewer than five hundred votes in a three way race, but he won the general election by more than two thousand votes. He would shortly become, by many estimates, the most colorful alderman in the history of New York City.

McGuinness first words in the House of Alderman are still recalled: “Mr Chairman, Mr. Chairman, I demand a point of order. I am Peter J. McGuinness and I represent the 15th A.D., Greenpoint, the garden spot of the world.” (Fugelsang, p. 54)

He would become perhaps the most voluble member of the Board of Aldermen ever. He made speeches almost every session, and these speeches were long. “There’s nothing I liked like giving a hot spiel,” he said. “I guess

me pals are glad I don't do that anymore. I was getting to be a gasbag." (Rovere, p. 33) According to one observation about MacGuinness speech-making:

Years of windjammer oratory had a curious effect on him, not unlike the effect of too many blows to the head on a fighter. He is speech-drunk. Just as an old pug will come out swinging at the sound of a dinner bell, so McGuinness will break into a speech at the mention of George Washington, Pope Pius XII, Franklin D. Roosevelt, or any other name that is hallowed in his kind of politics. (Rovere, p.33)

AS LEGISLATOR & DISTRICT LEADER

McGuinness proved himself to be a very able legislator. He had a unique ability to reach across the aisle and form friendships with his political opponents. When "The Little Flower," Fiorello LaGuardia, defeated the Democratic candidate for mayor McGuinness graciously stated, "The Little Flower is a most splendid gentleman. Under him, we know the poor people of this city will be looked after, irregardless of what may befall. What he done, he done honest and he done good." (Rovere, p.38)

B. Charney Vladeck, a Socialist alderman from the lower East Side, was one of his warmest admirers. "That Irisher!" Vladeck used to say. "Sometimes he makes me wish I was a Democrat." (Rovere, p.35) McGuinness won Vladeck's friendship by giving Democratic sponsorship to a number of Socialist resolutions. "Many's the time, he said 'I used to say, "Cheeny, old pal, if you got something you really want to get through this here board, give it to me, and I'll make it Irish for you." I figure what the hell, if something was good enough for Cheeny, it was good enough for the other aldermen. Cheeny give me a lot of contracts to put through, and all the Democrats thought they were mine and voted for them.'" (Rovere, p.35)

In 1924 McGuinness challenged James McQuade for the position of Democratic district leader. McGuinness and McQuade dis-



liked each other and for two months the acrimonious campaign riveted Greenpoint. McQuade had the advantage of having the Brooklyn Democratic machine and its patronage behind his campaign, but McGuinness proved to be a far superior street orator. On April 1, 1924, primary day, a huge blanket of snow covered the area and McGuinness feared his voters would not turn out in large enough numbers to win the election. His fears were unfounded. He won by a few hundred votes and would remain district leader for the rest of his life. McGuinness felt that really effective politicians stayed in the wards as district leaders. He could not understand the tendency of political bosses to take congressional nominations for themselves. "I'd never be such a sap as to send meself to Washington' he says, and 'Believe me, I'm glad I was never in a fix where anyone else could send me. I'm asking you, if a man's a leader in New York, what the hell business has he got being in Washington?'" (Rovere, p.22)

The greatest challenge that McGuinness faced was defending himself against accusations that he used his political club as a front for bookmakers and professional gamblers. On March 12, 1927 McGuinness' political clubhouse was raided and he was arrested and charged with bookmaking. In 1931 McGuinness, waving his Fifth Amendment rights, testified before the New York State

Photo:
McGuinness poses as baseball catcher in a gag photograph. McGuinness displayed great affection for the people of Greenpoint and worked diligently on their behalf. In 1948, during the funeral procession for him on the streets of Greenpoint, flags were lowered, stores were shut, windows were draped in black, and thousands of people stood in silence. Courtesy of Geoffrey Cobb.

Hofstadter Committee investigating corruption. Although many Tammany Hall politicians had the huge sums they secreted into bank accounts exposed, McGuinness' accounts showed no large sums and McGuinness successfully defended his reputation as being "As clean as a whistle." McGuinness charmed Samuel Seabury, the judge investigating the case, just as he had everyone else in politics. Later, Seabury was asked why he kept McGuinness on the stand for six long hours. He replied "Because I liked to hear him talk." (Rovere, p.40)

HIS ACHIEVEMENTS

In 1931 during his farewell speech to the Board of Aldermen he summed up his achievements while on the Board of Aldermen:

I drove nine gypsy bands out of Greenpoint as well as cats and dogs that used to run down the streets. One of the best things I done was to establish a farm garden so that children could learn the value of real vegetables. I got Greenpoint, three playgrounds, the subway, a million and a half dollar bridge and two million dollars in paving. I done good. I thank you. (Fugelsang, p.145)

McGuinness resigned his position as alderman to serve in a number of positions reserved for politicians, but he continued to serve as Democratic leader of Greenpoint until his death. In his later years he used his political clout to secure for Greenpoint its subway line and the massive McCarren Park pool, a W.P.A. project that he got for the area, perhaps as payback for turning out huge numbers of Roosevelt votes on election day. McGuinness was elected Brooklyn sheriff and registrar, but both offices were abolished by ballot initiatives. He died of a heart attack in 1948. In the year of his death he said, "I am very grateful to the people of the Garden Spot. They have been so kind and generous to me that I don't know the words to thank them. Not once have they let me down." (Fugelsang, p.145) Shortly before

his death he also said, "I have always tried to the best of my abilities to reflect credit both to the office and the trust of my neighbors and friends." He also put into words his love of his area, "There is no place on God's green earth like the garden spot of the world and among all the people of the world there are no finer ones than our right here in Greenpoint." (Fugelsang, p.145) After his heart attack and two days before his death, he gave a final message to his son for his constituents, "I love the people of Greenpoint and I am thankful for their support. My political success is due to their loyalty." (*Greenpoint Weekly Star*, June 16, 1964 page 1)

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