McKelway, Benjamin Mosby [1]

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Benjamin Mosby McKelway, newspaperman, was born in Fayetteville [2] of Scottish ancestry. His father was Alexander Jeffrey McKelway [3], Presbyterian [4] minister, journalist, and child labor reformer; his mother was Lavinia Rutherford (Ruth) Smith, the daughter of the Reverend Benjamin Mosby Smith, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. Journalism and the ministry drew numerous members of McKelway's family. His great-uncle, St. Clair McKelway, was editor of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, his brother St. Clair was a staff writer for *The New Yorker* [5], and his brother Alexander Jeffrey was a Presbyterian minister and navy chaplain during World War II. Successive generations inherited not only one another's names but also dominant character traits, especially determination and optimism.

At the time of McKelway's birth, his father was pastor of the Fayetteville Presbyterian Church. In 1898, when Alexander McKelway assumed the editorship of the *Presbyterian Standard*, the state organ of the church, the family moved to Charlotte [6]. The senior McKelway's affiliation with the National Child Labor Committee in 1904 prompted moves to Atlanta in 1906 and permanently to Washington, D.C., in 1909, when he became the organization's chief congressional lobbyist. Although the McKelways lived modestly, they retained a Scottish housekeeper and, as an intimate family, frequently entertained relatives.

Vacations at eastern seashores, football, and hunting highlighted Benjamin's upbringing. Nicknamed "Bo," he possessed a "winning and forceful personality" which enchanted his younger brothers and sister who emulated his example as the oldest male. McKelway attended Western High School in the District of Columbia and entered Virginia Polytechnic Institute with ambitions to be a "scientific farmer." Service in World War I [7] in 1917 and 1918 as a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army Infantry interrupted his education. A newspaper career apparently attracted him first in 1916, when he was briefly a reporter for the *Washington Times*, which employed his father as an editorial writer in 1917. Although McKelway studied at George Washington University and the University of Virginia, he was never graduated from college; instead, he began a practical apprenticeship as news editor and editorial writer with the New Britain (Conn.) *Herald* in 1919 and 1920. In 1921 he initiated his distinguished fifty-five-year association with the *Washington Star*. From 1921 to 1946 he rose through the paper's ranks as reporter, city editor, news editor, managing editor, and associate editor. Selected as the first nonfamily editor in 1946, he retained that position until 1963, when he assumed the title of editorial chairman, which he held for the remainder of his life.

His colleagues honored him by electing him president of the Associated Press [8] (1958–63), president of the Grid-iron Club (1958), and president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (1949–50). A resolution of tribute by the board of directors of the Associated Press in 1963 emphasized McKelway's devotion to freedom of the press, the shibboleth of his career. The theme of his 1964 Pulitzer Memorial Lecture at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism was resistance to any form of press censorship.

His role in the inspection of German concentration camps and his advocacy of the Nazi war crimes trials demonstrated that he had acquired his father's commitment to public service and social justice. Although McKelway identified with no political party, as a concerned citizen of the District of Columbia he campaigned for presidential suffrage for District residents and promoted civil rights [9] before the cause was popular. As a trustee of the District of Columbia Public Library, the Rockefeller Foundation, George Washington University, the National Geographic Society, and the Washington National Monument Society, McKelway supported education and philanthropy. He served as president of the Washington Board of Trade in 1945 and 1946. Social memberships in the National Press, Gridiron, Alibi [10], Cosmos, Chevy Chase, and Metropolitan clubs reflected his gregariousness. A member of Delta Tau Delta, he was an adviser to the Pulitzer Prize Committee and was honorary president of Sigma Delta Chi. He continued his family's affiliation with the Presbyterian church.

In 1920 he married Margaret Joanna Prentiss, who died in 1974. He was the father of three sons: Benjamin Mosby, Dr. William Prentiss, and John MacGregor. John maintained tradition as a reporter for the *Washington Star*. McKelway succumbed to kidney failure at Sibley Memorial Hospital and was buried in Rock Creek Cemetery, Washington, D.C. A portrait of him on a sailboat in Maine hangs in his son John's home.

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Additional Resources:

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