



2013

James McGowan

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Illinois Wesleyan University

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Recommended Citation

McGowan, James and Ledvort 2013, Elissa, "James McGowan" (2013). *All oral histories*. 54.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/oral_hist/54

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Oral History Interview with James McGowan
May 3, 2013

Elissa Ledvort: This is Elissa Ledvort. I am a senior at Illinois Wesleyan, and I'm sitting here with James McGowan. Can you please say what your affiliation is with Illinois Wesleyan?

James McGowan: Yes, I'm Professor Emeritus of English. I retired in year 2000.

Ledvort: Okay. And what brought you to Illinois Wesleyan? Did you teach at any other universities before that?

McGowan: Yeah, I was teaching in New Jersey at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken. And I wanted to get back to a liberal arts school. So I sent out a lot of letters. This was 1969, when the job market was very tough, and I probably sent out thirty letters and got one job offer at Illinois Wesleyan. [Chuckles] I also taught one year at Monmouth College in New Jersey.

Ledvort: Okay.

McGowan: So that was a no-brainer, I took—having never heard of Illinois Wesleyan. So at least I got out of there and those engineers.

[Ledvort and McGowan chuckle]

McGowan: I interviewed with President Eckley who was Wesleyan president at the time. He said what he was trying to do was bring the humanities and social sciences and sciences up to the level of the professional schools, because I think Illinois Wesleyan's reputation, at that time, 1969, was based largely on the school of music, school of drama, school of art, and nursing. And what President Eckley was trying to do was bring in faculty, raise the level of the rest of the school [Note from James McGowan January 17, 2014: ...so in 1969 he brought in a number of good people, some of whom are still here—Roger Schnaitter is one. The next year he brought Mike Young from Harvard, and Bob Bray from University of Chicago, among others. My graduate school was Rutgers, and I was ahead of those I mentioned in experience, because I had the Ph. D. in hand, plus three years of full-time teaching (and three years in the Army)]

Ledvort: What classes did you teach?

McGowan: I've taught a lot of classes. Everybody in the university department taught Expository Writing. But I was hired in part because I had taught in a humanities program at Stevens Institute of Technology. They didn't have a university English department. They had a humanities department. So one of my assignments, when I got to Wesleyan, was to teach the 300 level humanities, which of course you may not know anything about. Everybody in the school basically took it. It was a kind of a requirement. It was a big lecture and then there were discussion sections. So I did a couple of lectures, but mostly led the discussions. Led one or two of the discussion sections. So I taught expository writing, humanities. I taught things like 18th century literature, literature of the romantic period, and then also I got into creative writing, because I had published a few poems. And there weren't any other published creative writers on the faculty at that time. So fairly early I got into teaching a section of creative writing. And then my main thing in literature was probably American poetry, which was offered many years. I also did some travel courses.

Ledvort: Where'd you go?

McGowan: Twice to London, to study William Blake, as both as poet and artist. And then I did twice the course that started in London, a week in London, a week in Paris, and a week in southern France. And we were studying both literature and art again, and van Gogh and Cézanne in southern France. And the impressionist Monet and so forth in Paris, plus the French poet Charles Baudelaire. So again, back and forth poetry or literature and painting and art, not that I'm an art scholar myself, I'm not. But I got interested in that by teaching in the humanities course because we would touch on artistic movements of whatever time period we were studying. And I got interested in that. Also I've been translating the poetry of the French poet Baudelaire. This was from about 1980 on. What else did I teach? Oh here and there other things, but that's basically it.

Ledvort: Okay. Did you ever teach Wordsworth?

McGowan: Did I ever teach what?

Ledvort: Wordsworth?

McGowan: Oh sure, in romantic literature, yeah.

Ledvort: Yeah. Did you ever take your students to see Tintern Abbey?

McGowan: No, we didn't get to Tintern Abbey. We stayed mostly in London but we also had a side trip to Canterbury. So we were mostly focusing on William Blake himself. Three weeks of William Blake might sound like a lot but it worked out alright.

Ledvort: I ask because I'm an English major. [Chuckles]

McGowan: Yeah. [Chuckles]

Ledvort: And that was one of my favorite poems that I read.

McGowan: Yeah, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey."

Ledvort: Yeah.

[McGowan chuckles]

Ledvort: What students stick out in your mind from Wesleyan?

McGowan: That's a question that many professors would find hard to answer. They'd say oh, there were so many. I don't find that hard to answer. Sandra Steingraber was my most outstanding student. I don't know if that name means anything to you. She's in jail right now for civil disobedience. She was protesting the practice of fracking.

Ledvort: Yes I did—

McGowan: Yeah.

Ledvort: —just hear about that, yeah.

McGowan: Yeah. She's a remarkable person. And she took I think five courses, from me, including one that was an independent study. So yes I have had other remarkable students but she still stands out.

Ledvort: What was she like as a student?

McGowan: Very intense. She believed she was dying of cancer at the time. I didn't know that. But very concentrated in her-in her applications to what she was doing. She was a biology major. We didn't have double majors then. Certainly she would've been a double major if we had that. She had honors in biology, she won the English writing award. She's since come back to Wesleyan to teach short term courses both in the English department and in the biology department. She's a published poet as well as a scientist. I don't have anything to do with her being a scientist but might've had a little bit to do with her poetry. [Chuckles] Find a student like that, you just get out of their way, basically.

[Ledvort and McGowan laugh]

Ledvort: Have you kept in touch with her?

McGowan: Yeah. Yeah, we've remained fairly close. She now has a family. She has two children, and a husband, who's an artist.

Ledvort: What traditions have changed at Wesleyan? And which in particular are you sad to see go?

McGowan: Ha!

Ledvort: And which are you glad to hear are constant?

McGowan: Oh one tradition was that freshmen had to wear beanies!

Ledvort: Yeah, I remember seeing pictures of that!

McGowan: Yeah! [Laughs]

Ledvort: I've never seen it in person.

McGowan: Glad to see that one go, huh? Didn't make any sense to me.

[Ledvort chuckles]

McGowan: Any traditions that we've lost that I wish we had back then...Oh I don't know, there's probably...I don't have an answer to that. I'd have to think some more about that. Fraternities and sororities have no doubt changed but I never did know much about fraternities and sororities. That wasn't—I wasn't interested in that.

Ledvort: We can come back to it if you want. Okay. How did you feel about the Bloomington-Normal community when you first came here?

McGowan: When I first came here?

Ledvort: And then how has that changed since you've lived here?

McGowan: Now that-that-that I can answer.

[Ledvort chuckles]

McGowan: There weren't any decent restaurants in town.

[Ledvort and McGowan laugh]

McGowan: It was hard to find a doctor. And this is a very provincial kind of place. Still is, in a way, but, oh there are some good-very good restaurants in town here. I don't have trouble finding specialist doctors that I need. I have a lung condition, and I have a great lung doctor right in town. And I've been treated for prostate cancer at the Community Cancer Clinic, where they have up to date equipment better than other communities have. It's—I learned right away that people are basically honest around here. Coming from the East Coast, it's a little bit of a surprise.

Ledvort: Where are you from, originally?

McGowan: New Jersey.

Ledvort: Okay.

McGowan: Yeah. Yeah...grew up about twenty miles from the ocean. Wow look at that.

Ledvort: Yeah it's pouring.

[Ledvort and McGowan chuckle]

McGowan: So I first applied to colleges on the east coast, and didn't get anywhere there, so I broadened the search and wound up here. When we first got here, we lived in a university supplied apartment. It's no longer a building, it was torn down. But we were upstairs, and downstairs was shared by the student-run coffee house, where all the hippies hung out—

[Ledvort chuckles]

McGowan: —and on the other side downstairs was campus security, where all the-where all the pigs were hanging at. [Laughs]

Ledvort: Oh! [Chuckles]

McGowan: And there was some of that-some of that attitude going on there. '69. The head of security was a man named John King. He was—now if you've seen movies with the potbelly sheriffs, that's John King!

[Ledvort and McGowan laugh]

Ledvort: Did you know him well?

McGowan: Excuse me?

Ledvort: Did you know him well?

McGowan: Well we-we interacted quite a bit because we were in the same building.

Ledvort: Okay.

McGowan: I don't think we were pals or anything.

[Ledvort and McGowan chuckle]

Ledvort: Which faculty or employees at Wesleyan were you close to?

McGowan: We had...a bunch of us came together in '69 and 70' and '71. we're pretty close. We partied each other's houses and so forth, and helped each other move. We had a kind of a moving club. We would all help each other move into whatever, house or apartment. I think of Larry Colter, Don Koehu, Sue Huseman, John Heyl, and others. Yeah it was a fairly tight-knit group of young faculty.

Ledvort: Yeah.

McGowan: Yes, most of them have gone their separate ways.

Ledvort: Okay. And what were-what are your favorite aspects of Wesleyan as a university?

McGowan: I like the existence of the professional schools, and the way it's integrated between the [clears throat] excuse me—the other parts of the university—[clears throat] the ways they play off one another and I think that works pretty well. And I like the double majors, although I have some reservations about that. But I think basically it's a good idea. What was the question again?

Ledvort: What were-what are your favorite aspects of Illinois Wesleyan?

McGowan: Well I'll tell you one. When I first came here to interview, I met people from various departments. It wasn't just the English department. [Note from James McGowan January 17, 2014: I remarked it then, and it proved true when I came here to teach—stayed true all along, as far as I can tell. You're not stuck with one circle of friends here; you can have friends from all over the campus. Another matter that I think is remarkable has to do with the building projects on campus—ambitious plans carried out in style: examples are the Shirk Center and Ames Library. Much credit to President Minor Myers.]

Ledvort: Is there anything that you would like to see improved in the future at Wesleyan?

McGowan: Well I wish they continued to try to broaden the student body. International students or students from elsewhere beyond Illinois, and also that goes for the faculty as well. And I think we're making strides in that direction. I think the students are—some exceptions of course—the students are a lot better now than when I came here, although there were some few good students. My wife and I were—I was on fairly good terms with students in the drama school because Anne was taking courses in the drama school. She-she finally finished her degree here in the English department, but she took several courses in drama school. I got to know the faculty and some of the students. And those were great days for the school of drama. Late 60's, early 70's. That was a kind of a heyday I think for them. So that's where the interesting students were, and faculty as well.

Ledvort: What is your favorite memory from Wesleyan? Or, I guess-I know that's a hard question but I kind of like to look at places, different, actual places on the campus. Before I ask your favorite memory, what are your favorite areas of the campus?

McGowan: Well the old-the old Phoenix I say was right next door to the campus security. That was a great place. And some ISU students hung out there too at Wesleyan. And they moved the Phoenix to the Memorial Student Center. I don't know if it's still called the Phoenix or not.

Ledvort: Yeah, yeah.

McGowan: It's tucked back under the—[stairs]. Yeah, okay. That's—a lot of good memories of hanging out there when I was on the faculty. The new library is fabulous. I didn't get much of a chance to use that. Of course the athletic facilities are excellent. I use the Shirk center a lot. Oh I like to follow sports too. I think most sports at Wesleyan are good. Women's sports are also. We used to—well for many years, faculty and staff would get together at the Shirk center at the field house, gather at the field house, play pickup basketball games Tuesday and Thursday noon. And some people from the community would show up, and some students and some faculty and some staff members, Steve Seibring, for one. That was fun. I wish I could do that again. I played until I was 55, and then my lung condition started to catch up with me. I wasn't all that good but I was enthusiastic. [Chuckles]

Ledvort: So you followed the basketball teams at Wesleyan?

McGowan: Yeah.

Ledvort: Which team sticks out in your mind?

McGowan: Well the Sikma years if you go back that far. I'd say Sikma senior year they had a great team. But they had injuries just before they went to Kansas City so they didn't go as far in the nationals as they should've. After that, the team that finished third nationally, the year before the team that won, I think that was the best team. Brian Crabtree was on that team, Chris Simich too. I think they almost would've won the championship. They lost by one point in the semifinal round. And next year's team, the team after that one, won the national championship. They had been undefeated as JV's. They were of course practicing against the team that I thought was the best.

Ledvort: Yeah.

McGowan: So, they went right ahead and won the championship but I don't think that was as good a team as the other. I don't know what Denny would say about that. I think next year's team is going to be really good. How does-how does the women's team look for next year?

Ledvort: I don't know—I'm not sure.

[Ledvort and McGowan chuckle]

Ledvort: I don't follow it too closely. I know this year's is pretty good.

McGowan: Last year's were better.

Ledvort: [Chuckles] So, are you ready to go back to your favorite memory question?

McGowan: Oh.

Ledvort: What are your favorite memories at Wesleyan?

McGowan: Well some of them have to do with travel courses, because I really enjoyed that...I don't know, just playing basketball Tuesday and Thursdays. That was important to me. I wish I could do it again.

Ledvort: And it would be in-in Hansen that you played? Where was the basketball court?

McGowan: There was an old field house that was torn down. I have—I did play some in Hansen but mostly we played in the Fred Young Fieldhouse, which you never saw. It's a-it's a parking lot now, behind the Shirk Center. You know what, what I liked about Wesleyan too, I haven't said this yet, but I got to teach what I wanted to teach, basically. I mean, it was understood that we were supposed to teach some expository writing and we all had to do that. But we could make up courses or we could change the way courses had been taught to suit ourselves. That was even true of expository. I taught expository writing differently. Other people did it in ways that were contrary to me and I think worked for the students. So the relative freedom you had to teach what you cared about and the way you wanted to do it, that's one of the very strong things about Wesleyan, and about a small college in general. You get to teach a lot of different things. In a-in a big university, you usually specialize in a certain area, never get out of it. But everybody teaches everything at Wesleyan.

[Ledvort and McGowan chuckle]

McGowan: So I think that's-that's very good.

Ledvort: What classes were offered that you were sad to see are not offered anymore?

McGowan: Well maybe that big humanities course.

Ledvort: Was that required?

McGowan: Yes.

Ledvort: Okay.

McGowan: There was a way you could get around it but it was very laborious. You might as well grit your teeth and take it. When I run into alums from those days, they often say that was the most significant course they took at Wesleyan, even science majors. That was run by a husband and wife team, Doris and Joe Myers, who were friends of mine. So that, I think, is a loss. I don't know how you'd bring it back, things have changed so much.

Ledvort: What-what did you teach, specifically, in your humanities course?

McGowan: Well it was a two-semester course, and you started with the Greeks—the ancient Greeks, philosophy, and then the tragedians, and then the historians. Then there was a movement to Rome, which also kind of spun—Judaism kind of spun off of that, and early Christianity. And then got into beginning of the Medieval period at the end of the first semester, and the second semester started with Medieval-late Medieval, Renaissance, Shakespeare, Age of Reason, the 19th century Romanticism, Impressionism in art, Classicism in music, and wound up doing some 20th century things. It varied from year to year, whatever anybody felt like doing. So it was a very broad survey, history of ideas, yes, even to surreal art. It was fun to teach. How could you know all that stuff? Well, you stay a couple pages ahead of the students. [Chuckles]

Ledvort: Yeah. [Chuckles]

McGowan: That's at first, anyway. I got comfortable with it after a while.

Ledvort: Mhm. What events during your time at Wesleyan, that were going on in the country or in the world, seemed to affect the student body?

McGowan: Well there were the Kent State riots. The killings at Kent State were felt on the college campus. And there was rioting at Champaign-Urbana, and some-some teachers suspended classes so students could go out and demonstrate. I happened to be teaching 18th Century Literature and I had my class a State Policeman. He was an ex-marine, and these riots came up, and he was actually in Champaign, and he had bricks thrown on him. So I asked him if he wanted to say anything about his side of what was going on. So I told the students they could go demonstrate, or they could sit here and let's talk to Charlie McCarthy, was his name. And so he did that. It was kind of moving, eye-opening.

Ledvort: What year was that?

McGowan: I don't know, probably '70, early 70's.

Ledvort: And I'm not familiar, what happened at the Kent State riot?

McGowan: Well there were some unarmed students demonstrating at Kent State in Ohio, and the National Guard was called in to put down the demonstration. And they actually—they shot the students! Somebody issued them live ammunition and told them to shoot. So, I think four or five students were killed. Other events other than national events... [Chuckles]...this isn't a national event, but Illinois for a time moved the drinking age down to 18.

[Ledvort and McGowan laugh]

Ledvort: That would change a lot.

McGowan: That changed a lot, yeah. And then a couple years later, they bounced it back up again, to 21. But while it was 18, there was a certain amount of activity you might say of the student body. [Chuckles]

Ledvort: Would you say that the campus was more irresponsible when the drinking age was lower?

McGowan: Probably. I don't think of specific examples, but yeah, probably. What else.

Ledvort: I think this was the question that we were going to come back to. What traditions at Wesleyan have changed?

McGowan: I'm trying to think what was meant by traditions. Course, the beanie was of course a tradition. What else? Homecoming parade has gotten worse and worse every year.

[Ledvort and McGowan laugh]

McGowan: I don't know, they-do they still have the Titan games? I mean I think they do...

Ledvort: I don't know.

McGowan: Fraternities have kind of a track and field competition kind of thing. I don't know if they still do that or not.

Ledvort: I'm not sure. I'm not involved.

McGowan: Yeah. It had to do with Homecoming, I think. Tommy Titan is still around. I don't think he's changed any.

[Ledvort and McGowan chuckle]

Ledvort: Would you say that—I know you were talking about the Kent State riots, and the students were very affected by that.

McGowan: Yeah.

Ledvort: Would you say that the students at Illinois Wesleyan—that they protested a lot? That they took these issues that were happening to heart more than other students do?

McGowan: I think they did on that occasion. I think you don't associate Wesleyan students with outward demonstration of anything. But this stirred them up, the faculty too. But I think Wesleyan students generally behave themselves. Maybe that's not true anymore. For a while I think it was.

Ledvort: What would you say is the—when you first started at Wesleyan what sort of background did the different students come from how did that change once you left?

McGowan: Yeah that's a good question. Almost all from Illinois.

Ledvort: Yeah. [Chuckles] That's the same.

McGowan: Yeah. And-well it was even worse than now. If that's bad, not necessarily bad. And I think—I thought for a while what we need on this campus is a bunch of guys from New York. [Chuckles]

Ledvort: Yeah. [Chuckles]

McGowan: Or girls. Stir things up a little bit.

Ledvort: I definitely agree with that. I know I studied abroad in Rome and all my friends that I made were from the East Coast. And one from California and none from the Midwest. And it was very different. I remember being very taken aback sometimes because they were so forward and in the Midwest I feel like we're a little more polite.

McGowan: That's right.

Ledvort: But I think I like that. And I feel that was good to experience different people.

McGowan: Yeah, I don't know when or if I started calling myself a Midwesterner. I still think of myself as an East coast guy. We go to Maine every summer, we have a place there. So I try to keep-keep in touch with my East coast roots.

Ledvort: Yeah. Did—I know we have a very good study abroad program right now. Was it always like that?

McGowan: No, it's gotten better and better, and bigger and bigger. Yeah, and that's all to the good, in my opinion. Yeah we just had—basically had travel courses for a while. We didn't have much of this semester abroad stuff. I think it might've been possible if you really looked for it and, I don't know, wrote letters or something. But it's easy now. It's easy to spend a semester abroad. And all the good schools do that. You can't be a good school if you don't do that.

Ledvort: What would you say separates a Wesleyan education from other universities? What is unique to Wesleyan that still remains?

McGowan: Well back to the interaction between the professional schools and the college of liberal arts, that's almost unique. I don't know of any other schools like that, really, and I think it's a good thing. We have exceptional student performers, and that's been true for quite a while... One thing—this isn't exactly addressing your question, but I went to a small school, Middlebury College in Vermont, about the same size as Illinois Wesleyan roughly, and we knew everybody, and Wesleyan students don't do that. This was true while I was teaching here, and I retired thirteen years ago, so, could be wrong about that. But I found that students didn't know the names of the other people who in their classes, and that always surprised me because, I don't know, maybe it's because Middlebury being way up in Vermont, is a good deal—good distance away from some of the students' homes, whereas Illinois Wesleyan, the students from Illinois are still pretty close to home. So maybe they don't find their social life or make their friends on campus, maybe they're still with their hometown friends, I don't know. That did surprise me, it continues to surprise me. I just went to my 50th reunion. Basically, I knew who these people were, after 50 years.

Ledvort: Yeah I would agree with that, that not everybody knows each other even though we are—I—it's interesting, I'd say we're a close campus, but we're not, at the same time, in that respect—I think that's a very good point, that it's because everyone's from the same area so they don't depend on interaction with each other.

McGowan: Yeah. Talk about the Wesleyan bubble, but that's true of any school. I don't think it's particularly true of Wesleyan.

Ledvort: Would you say that Wesleyan—I think that Wesleyan does a great job of interacting with their community now. Was it always like that? Or has that changed over time?

McGowan: Interacting with the community in Bloomington, you mean?

Ledvort: Yeah.

McGowan: I think it's probably better now than it has been in the past. Although it's never been—there's never been a real town gown confrontation, I think, partly because Illinois State, they're a bigger target.

[Ledvort and McGowan chuckle]

McGowan: I should probably comment on Illinois State. I don't think there's enough interaction between Wesleyan faculty and Illinois State faculty. The philosophy department used to interact pretty well with—the two philosophy departments were pretty close. But that wasn't so much true of English or other areas. The poets kind of knew each other. I would occasionally go over to Illinois State and sit down in a class and one of the poets over there would come over and sit down in my class. There was a

little bit of interaction. There just seems to be room for a lot more. I don't know what the situation is right now. [Coughs] I think the people in the philosophy department who kept this up are pretty much gone. But maybe I'm wrong about that.

Ledvort: I know a lot of the philosophy department is retired.

McGowan: Yeah. Yeah. I had friends in the philosophy department. Don Koehn...Larry Colter. Both are—both are dead now. I was acting head of the philosophy department for one year [Chuckles] even though I was in the English department. So I had three offices. I had an office in the Mellon Center, an office in the philosophy department, and an office in the English department.

[Ledvort and McGowan chuckle]

Ledvort: Spread yourself around. [Chuckles]

McGowan: If anybody wanted me, they'd say hey, he's not here? He must've gone to the English department. Oh no he's not here. I guess he's at the Mellon Center. So, easy to get lost. [Chuckles]

Ledvort: I think that's all the questions I have for you, but if you would like to take a break for a moment and then think about if there's any other things that you want to talk about, we could do that.

McGowan: I'll get myself some more water.

Ledvort: Okay, I'll pause it. [recording stopped and started a little later]

McGowan: The question is, what impact is it—what was the question again?

Ledvort: What impact has Illinois Wesleyan made on your life? What have you taken from it?

McGowan: I used to think that if Wesleyan were located on the ocean, it would be ideal for me. I had to get used to the cornfields.

[Ledvort chuckles]

McGowan: But what I found at Wesleyan was, I've said before, good friends from all departments, basically the freedom to teach what I wanted, the way I wanted to teach it. Some limitations, but not much. The opportunity to travel with students, the...sense that the whole community of Bloomington-Normal is growing and improving, like the colleges certainly improved, since I first came here. So I-I-I now have a sense of a well-spent life, found a good place to spend it, professional-wise, kind of by accident. Could I have been happy elsewhere? I suppose, but I was pretty happy here, once I got used to the Midwest. I'm not sure that I have yet.

[Ledvort and McGowan chuckle]

Ledvort: What haven't you gotten used to?

McGowan: Oh, I don't know...

Ledvort: I know I-I really did not like it when I first came here. It seemed very rural.

McGowan: Where did you come from?

Ledvort: Suburb of Chicago.

McGowan: Yeah. You found it very rural, yeah. Well that is often bothering. A certain blandness to the Midwest. You can see it in Midwestern cuisine. It's all sugar and starch, or used to be. Things are improving there. When I was—I taught at Stevens Institute of Technology for two years, and each summer we had a program for which I volunteered to tutor students with college potential from ghettos, a bad background. So that's how I spent a good part of my summers, going up to Hoboken from West Long Branch where I lived. That was about an hour commute. And working with these underprivileged kids who were pretty interesting. So I go back, and when I got out here, I heard that there was a faculty organization for doing good works around. And what they wanted to do was get new drapes for the faculty lounge. So you know that's the kind of thing you have to get used to.

Ledvort: Alright.

McGowan: Okay.

Ledvort: Do you have any—

McGowan: No.

Ledvort: Okay. [Chuckles] Thank you very much.