

**2019 Thomas Jefferson Award**  
**Presented to Professor John McGowan**

February 14, 2020 at the UNC Faculty Council meeting

*Introductory remarks by Megan Matchinske, Professor Emerita  
of English and Comparative Literature, UNC Chapel Hill*

It is with great pleasure that I introduce, and celebrate, John McGowan, John W. and Anna H. Hanes Distinguished Professor of the Humanities. I can think of no one more deserving of the Thomas Jefferson award.

While John McGowan is certainly one of the most accomplished and well-known scholars in the English and Comparative Literature Department (with eight books and countless articles to his credit), what makes him so deserving of this award is far simpler: like the namesake to this award, he has spent his scholarly career asking important questions: for instance, what ought to be the responsibilities of a public intellectual in democratic society? McGowan's passion for justice extends across every facet of his being, from his scholarship and teaching to his participation across extra academic settings. Indeed, of late I find myself turning with more and more frequency to McGowan's blog: Reflections on Literature, Politics, and Culture. The topics here, always timely, offer a snapshot of current events, readings, and civil justice issues.

Put simply, McGowan's intellectual work is focused on how to sustain active, effective and meaningful action in a society that has largely rejected all three. Dismayed by the degree to which current society has accepted the certainty of impending disaster (imagined in environmental, economic and/or political terms), McGowan wants to recover and reinvent ideas of pragmatism (pace thinkers from James and Dewey, to Burke and Arendt): "We continue to act," he insists, because actions work, at least some of the time ("The Possibility of Progress: A Pragmatist's Account," 37). For McGowan the trick is to decide how and where to pressure our always mixed, always contingent endeavors. "We have many problems," he writes, "but this one of figuring out how to balance desirable local freedoms with adequate understanding of how they must be limited in order to prevent larger, systematic, harms is high on the list" (40).

For teaching us that ethics and inspiration, advocacy and justice, belong both within and beyond academic settings, and that democracy is always worth fighting for, Professor John McGowan you are the very definition of a Thomas Jefferson scholar.