

Promoting the Maynooth University (MU) Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive

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Background

In November 2011, Sister Majella McCarron donated 28 letters and 27 poems written by Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa to the library at Maynooth University (MU). The letters were written to Sister Majella in the two years leading up to his execution. Saro-Wiwa had been leading a peaceful protest against the environmental destruction of his homeland Ogoni in the Niger Delta, by the international petrochemical industry. Despite widespread international protest, including the intervention of President Bill Clinton, he was executed, along with eight others (the Ogoni Nine), by the then Nigerian military regime. The letters to Sister Majella were smuggled out of military detention in food baskets. She kept the collection among her personal belongings for sixteen years. In her mid-seventies she had concerns about the future of the collection, recognising their potential value to researchers and human rights activists. She approached MU, which has strong associations with missionary activity and a range of courses dealing with social justice issues, as a suitable home for it. Sister Majella also donated a collection of photographs, video recordings, flyers, articles and artefacts including a cap that had belonged to Ken Saro-Wiwa and a Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) flag.

Publishing the letters

The formal handover of the letters took place on the 10 November 2011: this marked the sixteenth anniversary of the execution of the Ogoni Nine. The level of international media coverage of the event instilled in us a desire to make it more widely available. Sister Majella was keen that Saro-Wiwa's ideals around non-violent protest would be available to social movements, particularly those concerned with environmental justice internationally. We discussed the idea of a book based on the letters. Three of the people who spoke at the handover (myself, the Deputy Librarian; Dr Idé Corley, a lecturer in post-colonial studies; and Dr Laurence Cox, a lecturer in sociology) set about editing the letters and putting them in context. One of our first tasks was to find a publisher. While Saro-Wiwa was quite a prolific author and the producer and writer of a very popular television series in Nigeria (Basi & Co), sixteen years had passed since his death. The international outcry and media coverage of the execution of the Ogoni Nine had largely been forgotten. We were fortunate to find a small publishing house – Daraja Press – based in Senegal, which has close links with the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), and an extensive distribution network in Africa. We received some funding from Trócaire, an Irish aid organisation, towards the publication and distribution of the book. With the support of Dr Owens Wiwa, brother of Ken Saro-Wiwa and a personal friend of Sister Majella, we published *Silence would be treason: last writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa* (Corley, Fallon, & Cox, 2013). The book contains the 28 letters and 27 poems by Saro-Wiwa and a poem written by Sister Majella. Three essays, by the editors, place the collection in the context of African literature, social movements and archival and special collections. The volume also includes photographs from the archive. The book was launched at Maynooth University by Dr Owens Wiwa, Ken's brother, in a moving ceremony which received extensive media coverage, including an interview with Dr Wiwa on national prime-time radio and a interview with me on *Global village*, an Irish national radio programme.

The Ken Saro-Wiwa Audio Archive

While working on the book, I explored other possible avenues to publicise the letters and the work of Saro-Wiwa. A local media producer, from a company that runs a range of courses in the university, had filmed the handover of the letters in November 2011, producing a short piece for national television. We discussed possible collaborations and decided to produce an audio archive with recordings of people connected with Ken Saro-Wiwa and the issues in the letters. Sister Majella was keen to participate. We recorded her in eight



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thirty-minute recordings covering her childhood in rural Ireland, her decision to enter religious life, thirty years on mission in Nigeria, meeting and working with Ken Saro-Wiwa to highlight the issue of environmental destruction in the Niger Delta, her efforts internationally to save his life and the lives of his eight colleagues (the Ogoni Nine) and her subsequent work on peace and justice issues in Ireland. The three editors were also interviewed. Dr Owens Wiwa was interviewed during his visit to Maynooth University to launch *Silence would be treason: Last writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa*. His interview gives an insight into growing up in an extended family in the Niger Delta, his growing awareness of the environmental destruction of his homeland, his efforts to support his brother in peaceful protest and to save his life, his going into hiding and escaping to Canada and subsequent efforts to retrieve and identify the remains of the Ogoni Nine. Dr Wiwa also read two poems written by his brother and one of these recordings was subsequently broadcast on Irish national radio. The University of Ibadan, where Ken Saro-Wiwa studied has also broadcast a number of the recordings.

The audio archive is hosted in Sound Cloud and is freely accessible via the internet from <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/library/collections/ken-saro-wiwa-audio-archive>

Plans are under way for the creation of the Digital Repository of Ireland (DRI) and once created it will host the archive.

Archival Literacy and the The Ken Saro-Wiwa letters

Quite a number Maynooth University programmes, particularly in the social sciences, have modules relating to topics such as environmental issues, social justice, community development, minority rights and development theories. I worked with the Professor of Adult Education to integrate the archive into a module on Development Theories on the BA in Community Studies. This is documented in an article we subsequently published (Fallon & Ryan, 2014).

Preservation and Conservation

The collection has been catalogued and the letters digitised. Preservation work has been carried out on items requiring attention. In 2012 Maynooth University completed a major extension to the Library. The Ken Saro-Wiwa archive is housed in the new Special Collections area, which provides custom-made space for the accommodation, consultation and exhibition of collections, which conforms to best international standards. People can view the letters by appointment.

Making the letters Available

In addition to producing the book and audio archive a number of smaller local initiatives to create awareness of the collection, have taken place. This is in keeping with Sister Majella's wishes and Maynooth University's strong commitment to engage with community in the widest sense of the word. The letters have been exhibited to mark events such as International Human Rights Day, Africa Day, Development Studies Week, the anniversary of the execution of the Ogoni Nine (November 10th 1995) and to coincide with conferences/seminars which have a development studies/conflict resolution theme. I've presented and co-presented at a number of seminars, speaking about the letters and the audio archive and have also spoken to a local public library reading group, who selected *Silence Would be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa* as their reading club book in February 2014. Children from a local secondary school have visited the library, viewed the letters and discussed the issues surrounding the conflict in the Niger Delta in class.



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Proceeds from the sale of the book are going to a University-administered fund to create a bursary for a postgraduate student to carry out work which is in keeping with Ken Saro-Wiwa's work and ideals.

Reflection

This was a really wonderful opportunity to work on a project that had great personal meaning for me. I've lived and worked in a few different countries in Africa; prior to the handover of the letters I had met Sister Majella McCarron and I've also written a number of features on African women writers for national radio and magazines. It was a great opportunity to work with colleagues on editing the collection, each of the three editors bringing different areas of expertise to the project. Working on the audio archive gave me a real insight into what is involved in producing sound files and the power of the spoken word. I feel it was really important to do more than preserve the letters for researchers. Hopefully, we have gone some way to meeting Ken Saro-Wiwa's wishes when he wrote in a letter, dated 1 December 1993, to Sister Majella:

Keep putting your thoughts on paper. Who knows how we can use them in future. The Ogoni story will have to be told! Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive PP7/2

Corley, I., Fallon, H., Cox, L. (2013). *Silence Would be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa*. Dakar: Daraja Press.

Fallon, H. & Ryan, A. (2014) *Death Row Correspondence: Integrating the Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive into an Undergraduate Program*. *Journal of Library Innovation*, 5 (2), pp. 52-59

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