

# Embedding Archival Collections in the Postgraduate Curriculum at Maynooth University Library

Róisín Berry and Ciara Joyce, Archivists, Maynooth University Library

## Introduction

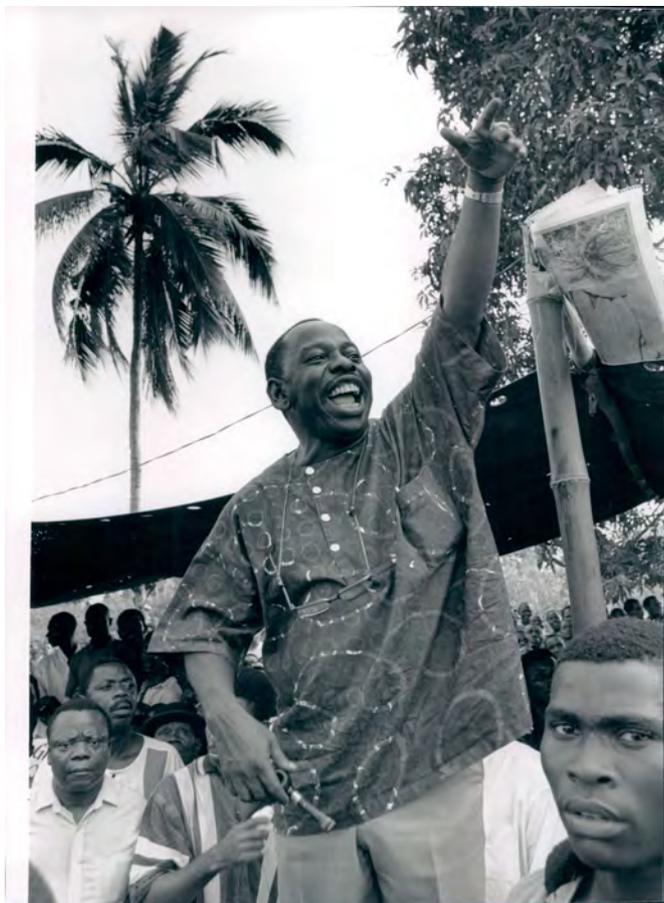
The Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive, a collection of death-row correspondence and other material from Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa to Irish nun Sister Majella McCarron (OLA), is one of Maynooth University Library's most hard-working collections. Since acquiring the archive in 2011, it has been utilised as part of a wide range of outreach experiences, including seminars, exhibitions (nationally and internationally), blog posts, articles, poetry workshops, school visits, and guided tours. Most recently, the collection was the focus of a workshop delivered as part of the module *Peace, Religion and Diplomacy* offered on both the MA in Mediation and Conflict Intervention and the MA in International Peacebuilding, Security, and Development Practice at Maynooth University (MU).

New approaches to skill acquisition and critical thinking using primary sources are increasingly common across campus and beyond. They present to the Library exciting ways to engage with users, and to the archivists a wonderful opportunity to share their knowledge and love of archival collections to an engaged and enthusiastic audience.

## Who Was Ken Saro-Wiwa?

Writer, TV producer, businessman and activist Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa was born on 10

October 1941 in Bori, Ogoni, in what is now Rivers State in Southern Nigeria. He received a scholarship to attend the Government College in Umuahia and went on to study English at the University of Ibadan, graduating with honours in 1966. He took on brief roles as a teacher and graduate assistant before the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War. Saro-Wiwa was appointed Administrator of Bonny province that same year before moving on to focus on his own writing and business interests. He established a publishing company, Saros International, and wrote and produced a popular television series *Basi and Company*.



Ken Saro-Wiwa (from his daughter Noo Saro-Wiwa)

## Meeting Sister Majella

Ken Saro-Wiwa was deeply concerned about the level of environmental destruction caused by the oil industry in his homeland in the Niger Delta region of South Eastern Nigeria. He established the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1990 and led a peaceful campaign against the damage wrought by Shell's oil extraction in the area. It was at this point that he first met Sister Majella.



Sister Majella McCarron (from her own collection)

Born in Derrylin in County Fermanagh, Sister Majella joined the Missionary Institute of Our Lady of Apostles (OLA) in 1956. She taught science for over thirty years in Nigeria, having moved there in 1964.

Through her work with the Brussels-based Africa-

Europe Faith and Justice Network (AEFJN) Sister Majella met Saro-Wiwa. The Network lobbied the European Union on behalf of communities badly affected by European business interests.

## The Ogoni Struggle

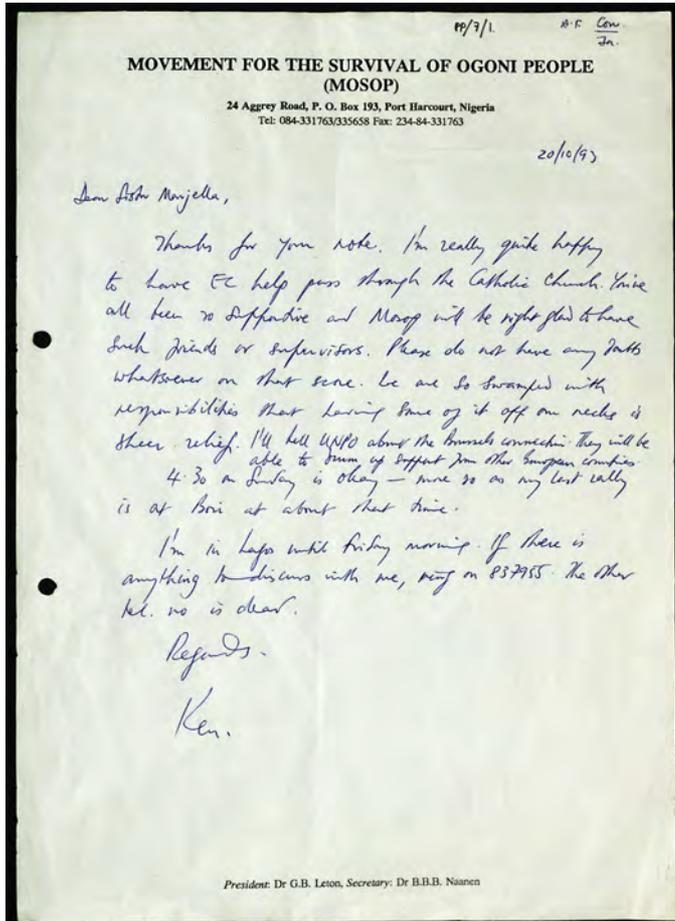
On 4 January 1993, over 300,000 Ogoni people protested in marches across each of the six kingdoms that comprise Ogoniland. Following the marches, the Federal Nigerian Government blockaded Ogoni and the villages were attacked. It is believed that over 800 people met their death, although this was blamed by the government on local ethnic conflict. In May 1994, during this period of unrest, four local chiefs were murdered. Saro-Wiwa was arrested and accused of encouraging the killings. He was held along with a number of others in military detention for nine months without charge. Sister Majella returned home from Nigeria in August 1994 having completed 30 years of work there. She had planned to work on the Northern Ireland process, but instead dedicated her efforts to campaigning tirelessly, with Trócaire, Ogoni Solidarity Ireland and other groups to save the lives of the 'Ogoni Nine' as they became known. During this period she corresponded extensively with Saro-Wiwa, and these letters form the main part of the archive today.

Despite Sister Majella's efforts in Nigeria and Ireland, and an outcry from the international community, Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight colleagues were executed by the Nigerian Federal Government on 10 November 1995.

## The Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive

The Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive was donated to MU Library by Sister Majella in November 2011, some

21 years after that first meeting. The archive includes 28 letters to Sister Majella, 27 poems, photographs showing the destruction of Ogoni villages, video cassettes recording visits and meetings after Saro-Wiwa's death, and articles and reviews relating to his work and to the campaign to save his life.



Earliest letter from Ken Saro-Wiwa to Sister Majella in the Archive

The importance of the archive is that it captures in rich detail the last two years of Saro-Wiwa's life, and documents his transition from activist to political prisoner. The letters and poems in particular record themes such as the on-going struggle to protect the Ogoni people, growing instability in Nigeria, Saro-Wiwa's conditions during his detention, and the importance of his friendship with Sister Majella during the final chapter in his life.

A letter to Sister Majella dated 13 July 1994,

provides an intimate account of Saro-Wiwa's living conditions during his imprisonment. He states:

*'My condition is not very bad. I have an air-conditioned room to myself and the electricity has only failed once. I can write and only yesterday succeeded in smuggling my computer into this place. I can cook (though I cannot cook) for myself and from time to time, I can smuggle out letters ... The only thing is that family members, lawyers and doctor are not allowed to see me.'*

To the fore of Saro-Wiwa's mind, however, is always the plight of the Ogoni people. Letter after letter, he expresses his concern regarding their welfare. His commitment to his people and their protection is unwavering, even when he himself is faced with death. In a letter dated 29 October 1994, he states:

*'My moments of depression here had more to do with the political situation in the country: worries over the Ogoni and such-like than the fact of my confinement. I miss my family, of course, but...it is a fitting price to pay for the joy of others.'*

Throughout his detention, and during some of the darkest chapters in his life, Saro-Wiwa reached out again and again, to his supporter and friend, Sister Majella McCarron or 'Sister M' as he often referred to her in his letters. A quote from another of his letters, dated 1 October 1994, captures the importance of their friendship to him. He tells her:

*'I long to see you back in Nigeria, helping among others, to guide the Ogoni people....You don't know what help you have been to us, and to me personally, intellectually.'*

### Archives Workshop

In early 2019, the Edward M. Kennedy Institute at

MU approached Special Collections and Archives about the possibility of using the Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive to deliver part of a module entitled *Peace, Religion and Diplomacy*. The Institute, established in 2011, aims to 'build capacity for constructive approaches to conflict at all levels in society'. Through a series of lectures and workshops, the module addresses freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief, and raises questions regarding religion and society from the perspective of diplomacy.



Visitors from the Kennedy Institute

Two workshops were offered on the theme of conscience and the individual, one looking at the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa and one at the case of Franz Jägerstätter, a World War II conscientious objector. Students were then asked to compare the stories of the two men.

Deputy librarian Helen Fallon and archivist Ciara Joyce, delivered the Ken Saro-Wiwa workshop to participating students in the Special Collections and Archives Reading Room, on 14 March 2019.

### Methodology

The two-hour workshop began with an introduction to Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni cause, delivered

by Helen Fallon. Students were given the context of Saro-Wiwa's campaign, arrest and execution and the background to how the letters he wrote to Sister Majella found their way to Maynooth.

Students then had the opportunity to look at the original letters, poems and photographs on display in the Reading Room. Archivist Ciara Joyce spoke about each item on display, reading out relevant extracts. The items were carefully chosen based on their content and the required learning outlined in the course descriptor. Students were asked to consider the complexity of the personal, political, economic and legal issues facing Saro-Wiwa or anyone who takes a 'counter-cultural' stance. Each letter exhibited showed evidence of these issues. For the quick dissemination of the contents of the documents and to aid the discussion, students received a handout highlighting relevant extracts from the letters.

The students undertaking this module were extremely enthusiastic, well-informed and engaged with the topic. The subsequent discussion demonstrated both their knowledge of the Saro-Wiwa story, and that they had thoroughly considered the implication of the stance he made and his personal sacrifice. Four of the participating students are from Nigeria and were able to offer their unique perspective on Saro-Wiwa's writing and the contents of the letters, which was interesting for both participants and Library staff.

### Outcomes:

The workshop afforded the opportunity to critically examine a complex and multidimensional topic. The original letters and the issues they embody were used as a catalyst for the discussion, demonstrating their usefulness in the development

of investigative and interpretive skills in the students and in stimulating informed group discussion.

For some of participants, it was their first visit to Special Collections and Archives and it demonstrated to them the importance of preserving and consulting primary sources.

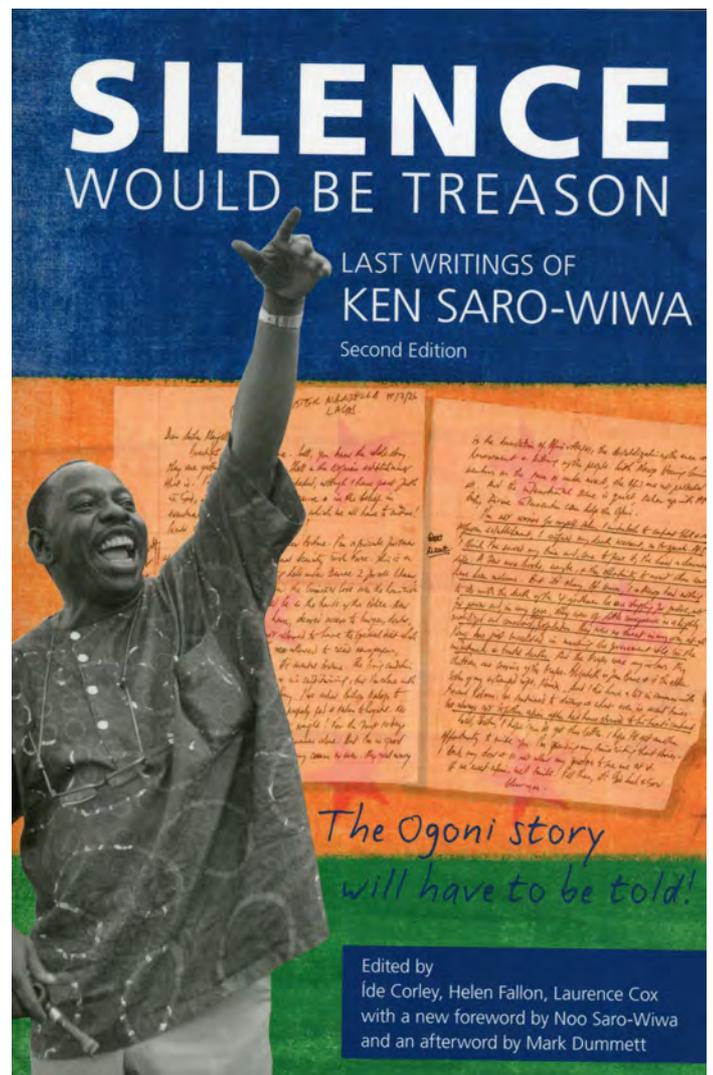
Overall the workshop was very enjoyable and worthwhile for both students and staff and the Library has received very positive feedback from the participants. Three out of the seven student have decided to use Saro-Wiwa for their module assignment, indicating the high level of interest in the contents of the workshop.

Through this collaboration the Library plays a significant role in a postgraduate programme that seeks to examine and influence the changing character of diplomacy and international relations.

### Access to the Collection:

The letters and poems contained in this collection have been published in the publication *Silence Would be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa* (edited by Íde Corley, Helen Fallon and Laurence Cox) which is available on open access. The digitised letters are also accessible in the Digital Repository of Ireland (DRI). The Ken Saro-Wiwa Audio Archive, a collection of recordings of people connected with Ken Saro-Wiwa, including his daughter Noo and his brother Owens, is freely available via the internet.

The collection is also available to students and external readers to consult in the Reading Room. For more information please contact Special Collections and Archives at [library.specialcollections@mu.ie](mailto:library.specialcollections@mu.ie)



Ken Saro-Wiwa Publication