

Whose story: Working towards diversity in the Maynooth University Library Collections

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Introduction

The University campus in Maynooth is home to two third level institutions – Maynooth University and St. Patrick’s College Maynooth. Maynooth University was formally established as National University of Ireland Maynooth in 1797. It has its origins in St. Patrick’s College, a seminary established in 1775. There are two buildings, the modern John Paul II Library and the historic Russell Library. Thus the Library in its various incarnations has a history of several centuries and this is reflected in its collection. The original, foundational collections, used by the emergent college in the early 19th century, were in many ways representative of a classic enlightenment era library, with material contributed by the early members of the college community, many of whom had been based in seminaries in France and Spain. These were built on over the 19th and 20th centuries, often by bequest and donation from priests and alumni scattered around the globe.



Russell Library

St. Patrick's College opened its doors to lay students in 1968. In 1997 there was a formal split with the establishment of National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUI Maynooth), subsequently termed Maynooth University. The last decade has seen a renewed focus on unique and distinctive collections, which are housed in the purpose-built Special Collections and Archives section in the John Paul II Library. This department, which houses among other collections, the Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive, is a key part of the library and represents a unique aspect of the library experience. While the Library's collections are available for study and research purposes to students and staff of both Maynooth University and St. Patrick's College Maynooth, Special Collections has a broader remit, as its collections are of interest and use to a broader cohort, including academics and students from other educational institutions (both nationally and internationally) and interested parties from the general public. To this end, these collections have been actively developed with the result that the scale and diversity of our special collections is incomparable to that of heretofore, with items ranging back to pre-Christian times. Many of our special collections now form a key foundation in our support for teaching across several disciplines.

If we operate on the basis that a library is a combination of *people, place, and collections*, it is clear that all three have seen significant evolution in Maynooth University, as in other institutions. In recent years, the idea and the reality of library collections has been challenged in several significant ways and this merits some exploration.

Firstly, as noted previously, our collections are broadening in scope and type. Where we once had a print-focussed collection predicated almost exclusively on the teaching needs of the university, the modern library sees collections ranging from Mesopotamian clay tablet, through manuscript and book to digital object.



Mesopotamian clay tablet

Open Access

Secondly, considerable work has been undertaken in the last decade to make scholarly literature more accessible to all. The Open Access (OA) Movement, while born in the Global North, has the potential to be transformative to institutions in the Global South, that cannot afford the punitive cost of subscription to scholarly publications, as outlined in more detail in Manji and Fallon's essay in this volume. OA can be seen as a fundamentally positive movement in scholarly publishing (and by extension in education) as it allows readers across the globe to gain access to academic scholarship, previously 'hidden' behind punitively expensive paywalls. For a researcher who is not affiliated to one of the wealthier universities, OA offers, at least in theory, an increasingly unfettered landscape of scholarly literature. In this regard it ensures that a far more diverse readership is accessible beyond the local academic community, which can only be good for inclusivity. This is evidenced by the broad reach of the open access version of *Silence Would be Treason: Last writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa*, containing the letters and poems of Saro-Wiwa to Sister Majella McCarron (OLA).¹

¹ Corley, I., Fallon, H. & Cox, L (2018) *Silence Would be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa*. Montreal: Daraja Press.
<http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/10161/>

The devil of course, is in the detail, and it is clear that academic publishers are typically loath to undermine their own business plans and, in some cases, exorbitant profit margins. However, even beyond this, the proposed model of OA espoused by many funders and publishers still requires payment of a sort, and this can still serve as a deterrent to researchers who are either unaffiliated or who work in institutions and regions where funding is unavailable to support open publication. The challenge of the 'Eurocentric' model of Open Access for such regions is clear and have been clearly articulated by prominent research groups in Central and Latin America for example.² For Open Access to be truly global in its benefits, it is clearly essential that models of funding, revenue and access are agreeable to all who might benefit and can be enacted at scale from the wealthiest to the poorest region.

Digitisation

Thirdly, and perhaps less contentiously, by harnessing the opportunities afforded by digitisation, libraries can 'open' their collections, providing free access to some of their most remarkable items to a global audience. Where once the prohibitive cost of subscription or travel might have prevented a researcher from visiting a library to view an essential collection, digitisation can enable a parity of access irrespective of geography or economics. Where Open Access is a complex series of challenges and negotiations between various stakeholders, local digitisation is library-led and arguably can be seen as the ultimate expression of the quintessential aim of a library; to have its collections engaged with, interrogated and through this to stimulate learning and the development of further knowledge. Given the way that collections have become fragmented between repositories and indeed regions, digitisation allows for the possibility of reunification of a collection and perhaps, if necessary a degree of 'digital repatriation' where an object which was removed from a region becomes accessible again albeit virtually. Clearly this would appeal to the global Irish diaspora who might relish accessing our Gaelic manuscripts for example, but when one considers the variety of our collections, it is evident that there are other groups who, while having no connection to Maynooth or even Ireland, may have an interest in a particular collection or item. In this regard the Saro-Wiva-Archive was a clear exemplar, being of

² Statement of the first consortium assembly from Ibero-America and the Caribbean, released September 2017

interest to both Irish and Nigerian audiences, but also students of social and economic history, social justice and activism and post-colonial literature.

Developing the collections

Fourthly and most importantly, the University has worked assiduously to consider precisely *what* to collect. This work came to fruition in the current collection development policy which attempted to distil our aims. Critically the policy notes the importance of the library role in representing those on the outside, or the margins of society. While it was not possible to provide a comprehensive suite of guidance, the policy endeavours to articulate the aim and the rationale of focussing on:

“the idea of ‘The Outsider’ which can be said to be a multidisciplinary theme, encompassing figures from various backgrounds, who were either marginalised or viewed as existing on the fringes of contemporary society, but whose impact in areas such as literature, history, or social movements is considerable. The adoption of such thematic areas is informed by the research themes of the University (both distinct and interdisciplinary) and the unique research heritage of both Maynooth institutions”³

Critically this is not simply an aspiration for its own laudable sake – there is a clear and important link to the educational aims of the university. In Maynooth this can be most visibly recognised in our unique resources, which encompass archives of less well-known playwrights, poets, marginalised historical figures and, importantly, in the collections of human rights figures such as Saro-Wiwa and Fr Dennis Faul.⁴ In recent years, the Library has furthered its focus on human rights issues, acquiring collections relating to the Northern Ireland Troubles. Interestingly one of the poems written by Saro-Wiwa For Sr. Majella McCarron, focuses on the link between Ogoni and Fermanagh (McCarron’s birthplace in Northern Ireland), noting the shared agony and hunger for justice and peace.⁵

³ MU Library Collections Development Policy p. 6

⁴ Monsignor Denis Faul (1932-2006) was a Maynooth educated priest who became actively involved in the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement and the hunger strikes of 1981.

⁵ Maynooth University Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive 20/6/95



The Troubles Collection

The key aim of the Library has been to collect – in as representative and impartial a way as possible – material showing not only the views of Catholic and Protestant, but of marginalised groups such as the British and Irish Communist Association.

Our collections have evolved over many years. The question of diversity in all its aspects, including collections, has been an area of more recent concern. Much of our modern collection is, by intent, reflective of the current teaching and research needs of the academy. In this, it can be said to reflect the academic views of colleagues who order items to support teaching and research. It is challenging, but important to acknowledge however that these collections will therefore also reflect any lacuna in knowledge and unconscious biases of all involved in developing it. This is not simply a consequence of a relatively homogenous staff cohort – it is also reflective of inequities in publishing and access. Such challenges for librarians, have been catalysed in recent years as part of a broader move to consider questions of diversity, white privilege, inclusion, and the important issue of decolonising of curricula and collections in Universities in the Western World. While this has figured most prominently in regions with clear legacies of empire building, it is essential that Irish institutions reflect on the diversity of their collections and, critically, the way these collections were established. For Maynooth, this requires us to look in particular at the role of the original educational establishment, St. Patricks College, which trained priests, many of whom partook in missionary activity around the world. Several of the more remarkable items in our collection were acquired as the result of these distant benefactors, including our stunning collection of Mesopotamian clay tablets which date back to c3000 BC. These were

given to the College by an Irish army chaplain and alumnus during the First World War. The fact that Ireland was, in many ways the first colony of the British Empire, does not obviate us from our responsibility to recognise our role in empire building and certainly should not preclude library staff from trying to reconcile the tension of an inheritance of wonderful collections with (in some cases), the potential legacy of oppression which brought them to us. In the recent past the Library has used such collection in the curation of exhibitions on topics relating to the middle and far east which might strike someone unfamiliar with both college and collections as incongruous given the origins of the college. It is essential when showcasing these collections to acknowledge their origins and indeed to strive while acknowledging, to avoid over-writing the culture and the provenance which brought them into being. With an increasingly diverse demographic of users, including international and students coming in via our 'university of sanctuary' status, outlined in Cliona Murphy's essay in this volume, there has never been a greater need for us to engage in considered reflection on our collections and how we present them.

Libraries have long aspired to be seen as 'neutral' spaces, devoid of observance to any espoused political or religious viewpoint. This does not preclude us from thinking critically on the morality of who our collections represent and how they came to be. While we rightly extoll the merits of an archive such as that of Ken Saro-Wiva, we must also acknowledge this legacy. Indeed, even the act of recognising the legacy is important, as it provides us with a foundation towards a more diverse collection which represents the breadth and variety of the world which the University seeks to engage with, learn from and contribute to.