



# The Maynooth University Library Ken Saro-Wiwa Poetry Competition: Engaging Community and Collections

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## Abstract

This article details the history and process of establishing the Ken Saro-Wiwa poetry competition and its success in engaging an international and diverse community. This competition is an important aspect of the collection itself as it has helped bring the contents of the collection into the community. The competition has also given people from diverse backgrounds – non-academic, academic, from different ethnicities, races, ages, and nationalities – the opportunity to engage and become part of the collection through poetry. This piece will describe the administration of the competition, the diverse cast of poets, the subsequent podcast featuring the poets from the school category, and, finally, the publication of *I am a Man of Peace: Writings Inspired by the Maynooth University Ken Saro-Wiwa Collection* in which over 40 poems from the competition dating back to 2018 were published.

**Keywords:** *Community Engagement, Poetry, Ken Saro-Wiwa*

## Introduction

Ken Saro-Wiwa was a Nigerian activist and writer who was executed along with eight fellow activists (The Ogoni 9) in 1995. The Ogoni 9 were executed for protesting about the activities of the international petrochemical corporation, Royal Dutch Shell, in Ogoni in the Niger Delta. Saro-Wiwa's death row correspondence to Sister Majella McCarron (OLA) was donated to [Maynooth University Library](#) in 2011. The collection has been a catalyst for a number of initiatives.

This article details one such initiative - the Maynooth University Library Ken Saro-Wiwa poetry competition. The competition has helped bring an awareness of the collection to a wider audience and has given people of different ethnicities, races, ages, and nationalities the opportunity to engage with the collection through their poetry. This initiative has provided a forum for people to explore issues from environmental justice to immigration.

## Administration

The administration of the competition included providing free poetry workshops, judging the competition, corresponding with the diverse cast of poets, hosting a Poetry Evening via Zoom, and the creation of the subsequent podcast featuring the poets from the school category. The poetry project culminated in the publication of [I am a Man of Peace: Writings Inspired by the Maynooth University Ken Saro-Wiwa Collection](#), which contains 21 essays and 42 poems. The book was published on the 10th of November 2020 by Daraja Press to mark the 25th anniversary of the execution of Saro-Wiwa and his eight colleagues (The Ogoni 9).

The book is in two sections. The first section is twenty essays by national and international contributors, including members of the Saro-Wiwa family. The

second section contains an introduction by the competition judge Jessica Traynor, the selected poems from the competition and a reflective essay I wrote for this section. My involvement as editorial assistant was primarily with the poetry section which is the focus of this article.



Image taken from the *Readings from the Maynooth University Library Ken Saro-Wiwa Poetry Competition 2020* Zoom event



Image taken from the 2018 Maynooth University Ken Saro-Wiwa Poetry Workshop

## The Poetry Competition

### Background

The Ken Saro-Wiwa Poetry Competition has been offered to transition year students since 2018. In 2020, the competition was extended to include an adult category. Since its conception, poet and creative writing teacher Jessica Traynor has judged the competition.

The competition was advertised via social media and other networks in March 2020 with a given date of end of May. There was no fee and entrants could submit up to three poems which had not been previously published. This and other [competition rules](#) were available on the library website. The Library funded two poetry writing workshops facilitated by Jessica Traynor in order to promote interest and engagement with the competition. While it was planned

to have a face-to-face workshop in April 2020, due to COVID-19, it was held via Zoom. The level of interest was high and so a second workshop was offered in May 2020. The workshops were two hours in duration, each on a Saturday morning.

### Administration

Sixty-six entries were received in the adult category and eight in the school category. I acknowledged receipt of all poems via e-mail. I then created two



documents, one for the school and another for the adult category, eliminating the identifying characteristics such as name, address, etc. These two documents were then sent to the judge, Jessica Traynor. She placed the selected poems into five categories: longlist, shortlist, notable mentions, second prize, and first prize. After Traynor made her selections, I then used my master sheet with the identifying information to identify the poets to contact and notify them of the results. The winning poets were given book tokens as prizes.

Once the successful poets had been notified, I then asked them all if they would agree to have their poem included in the book, [I am a Man of Peace: Writings Inspired by the Maynooth University Ken Saro-Wiwa Collection](#). Fortunately, all of the poets agreed to have their poems included.

### Events

Since 2011, the Library has organized an annual Ken Saro-Wiwa seminar. This event marks the anniversary of the executions, November 10th, and is a forum for discussion on the topics relating to the issues for which Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni 9 died. It was, unfortunately, not possible to hold the seminar in 2020. As an alternative, the anniversary was marked with a virtual Poetry Evening via Zoom. The event was facilitated by Jessica Traynor and several of the poets read their poems to a virtual audience. Lively discussion followed. The [video](#) of the event can be viewed on the library YouTube channel.

While the open access version of the book was available in November, the printed version was launched on December 10th. An open access version of [the book](#) is available via the [Maynooth University institutional repository](#). All contributors were mailed a complimentary copy of the book. Copies are available to purchase at €10. All proceeds from the sale of the book go to the Maynooth University Ken Saro-Wiwa bursary, which supports postgraduate study relating to the issues for which Ken Saro-Wiwa campaigned

### Poetry Podcast

The decision was made to have the adult poets participate in the zoom poetry evening event while the school poets would participate in a specially produced Maynooth University Library podcast. In this podcast, the student



poets read their poems, were interviewed and shared their thoughts on Ken Saro-Wiwa, the competition, and what topics were most important for them and their work. Bairbre Flood, a media producer, who was one of the short-listed poets in the adult category, was commissioned to produce the podcast. Many of the students had similar themes running through their poems, such as an urgency for action with regards to the Climate Emergency. This theme was highly appropriate for the competition because Ken Saro-Wiwa was an environmental activist. The podcast is freely available via the Maynooth University Soundcloud account and available for free to the public via the [Maynooth University Library website](#).

## Reflection

While all of the poems were awe inspiring and gave me great pause to consider the many global issues we face, there were two poems, one from the adult category and one from the school category, that spoke to me and moved me most.

### Night Feedings By Eilish Fisher

For the children separated from their parents at the U.S. Mexican border, detained in custody and neglected, 2018-present.

**I hear you call into the night's fluorescence,  
a cage unable to stifle the sound  
that travels around the world to this bedside radio.**

**I move in maternal mindfulness towards a source-  
my child's cries puffing like smoke through muted cot bars.  
I lift him while your sobs cling and sway.**

**I stir like tendrils of seaweed in these waves, a pulling of you to me.  
I would hold you all if I could-rock you into stony caverns  
of peaceful sleep and quiet listenings.**

**You would hear the tick tock of the clock on the wall,  
rustle of soft-pawed foxes in the woods, the purring  
as night's dark harnesses the bee-balm moon.**

**These days the numbing salve is washed away  
as we rock and cry and ache into the long night's waiting.**

Having spent two months working with Humanitarian Aid organisations along the U.S. – Mexico border in 2017, right after the new presidential regime at the time took office, I was particularly moved by this poem. The injustice and frustration many of us feel for migrants and the unjust immigration policies from country to country is often amplified ten-fold when it is migrant children who are being mistreated. Fisher says in her poem, 'I move in maternal mindfulness towards a source – my child's cries puffing like smoke through muted cot bars.' Our children, those of us lucky enough to have been born with the privilege of

keeping our children close to us and safe, are behind bars which protect them from falling, those of their cot, while the migrant children are pulled apart forcefully from their parents and put behind metal bars, as prisoners. As a parent and empathetic person, I feel her compassion emanating from this poem.

### Bystander By Conor Walsh

**As he reached into his pocket,  
He felt the cold metal key.  
It sends a shiver up his spine,  
But that will dissipate in an instant.**

**He turns around to take one last look at the site  
Before it becomes a profit driven retail outlet.  
He sees the family,  
A father, mother and four children,  
Attempting to hold back the emotions.**

**As they pack frantically  
He ponders how they must feel,  
The emotions that are consuming them.  
They certainly won't simply, dissipate.  
A tear comes to his eye.**

**But he reminds himself,  
This is not his fault.  
He is only doing his job,  
He's an innocent bystander.**

**What more could he have done?**

This winning poem in the school category by Conor Walsh also addresses the injustice and inequality that permeates our societies. In this poem, we have the bystander who is seemingly evicting a family from their home. The why is not important, just that the family are shifting into a state of further destitution. The bystander fights back emotions and just does their job. This is an element of our social constructs that I have thought a lot about, the fact

that power structures are established in a way that those who are profiting and making the most money do not have to 'deal' with or interact with those who are hurt and oppressed. If the lowly worker, in this poem the bystander, leaves their job, another will fill their place. They know this, so they separate themselves from their emotions and get the job done because they too are likely in need of money and do not see many options for themselves. Thus, in the pyramid like structure of this capitalist model, the character of the bystander makes the least money but faces the harshest realities while the evicted family has no one to complain to but the disgruntled and jaded poorly paid workers who have no power.

## Conclusion

The Ken Saro-Wiwa Poetry Competition was an effective way to involve the community with the collection, and indeed to add to it with their own writing. It is an example of how a library collection can inform and stimulate discussion around issues of concern to us as global citizens.

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