



Exhibition team with Cllr. Sean Power, Mayor of County Kildare and Sister Majella

# Ringling the Ogoni Bells: Maynooth University Library and Kildare County Library and Arts Service Exhibition

**Helen Fallon, Sandra Turner, Evelyn Cooley and Louise Walsworth-Bell**

On Tuesday 22nd of January, Councillor Sean Power Mayor of County Kildare, opened an exhibition from the Maynooth University Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive, in Athy Public Library. The Mayor praised the vision and collaboration of Maynooth University Library and Kildare County Library and Arts Service in bringing this important exhibition to the public. He spoke of the important role the public library plays in educating people on justice issues, noting the strong contribution of Irish religious orders to social movements in Ireland and overseas and thanked Sister Majella on behalf of the people of Kildare.

Speaking at the opening, Sandra Turner, Senior Executive Librarian said that Kildare Library and Arts Service was very enthusiastic about being involved in the collaboration, from the outset of being approached by Maynooth University. She spoke of how public libraries were known for storytelling and welcomed the opportunity to tell the “Ogoni story”.



Sister Majella McCarron, Dr. Ken Saro-Wiwa, Executive Director of the Ken Saro-Wiwa Foundation and Helen Fallon, Senior Executive Librarian of the Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive at the opening of the exhibition in Athy Public Library. Photo: Louise Walsworth-Bell

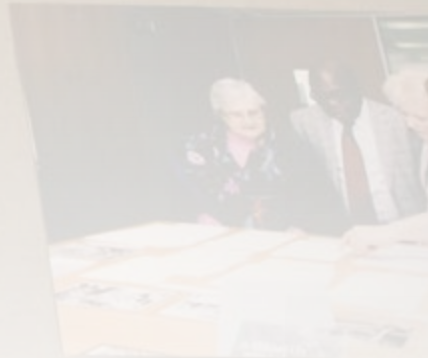
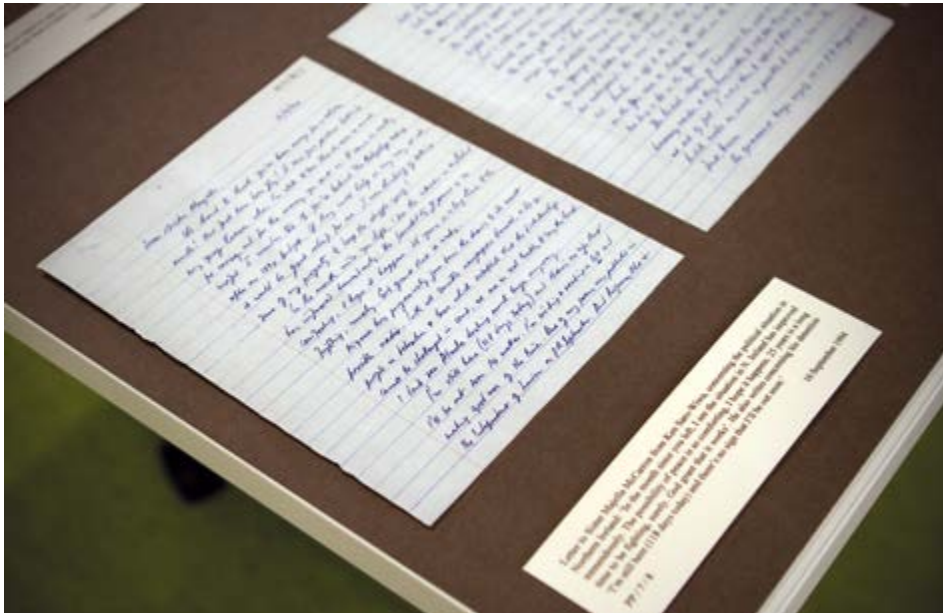


Photo: Louise Walsworth-Bell



### Background

Maynooth University Library received the death-row correspondence of Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa to Sister Majella McCarron (OLA) in 2011. In the early nineties Sister Majella worked with Saro-Wiwa highlighting the plight of the Ogoni people, a small ethnic group who live in the Niger Delta region of south-western Nigeria, an area with extensive oil reserves. While the then Nigerian military regime received massive revenues from the petrochemical industry, in Ogoni there was no piped water, no electricity, no hospitals, and few schools. Alongside this the environmental impact of the unchecked oil exploration had devastated the land. Saro-Wiwa established the Movement for the Solidarity of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1990 and Sister Majella helped him in many ways including organising leadership training, based on the psychosocial method of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian adult educator for MOSOP leaders. Saro-Wiwa was arrested and detained a number of times. Most of the letters date from his final period on death row and were smuggled out of military detention in breadbaskets. He was executed on 10 November 1995, with eight colleagues who are known as the Ogoni 9.

### The Exhibition

The exhibition includes four panels telling the Ogoni story, letters to Sister Majella and poems and photographs relating to Saro-Wiwa and his work. The letters cast light on Saro-Wiwa as political activist, writer, family man and friend of Sister Majella. They paint a picture of a well-educated and articulate Nigerian writer and illuminate his efforts to help the Ogoni people. The exhibition aims to provide a very real sense of Ken Saro-Wiwa, his enthusiasm for life, his commitment to his beliefs and his desire to help his fellow countrymen.

Speaking at the opening, Helen Fallon, Deputy Librarian, Maynooth University, explained how the title for the exhibition “Ringing the Ogoni Bells” was selected.

In a letter dated 1 December 1993, Saro-Wiwa wrote 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.**

In a later letter he referred to Sister Majella ringing the Ogoni Bells, after she had successfully got the *Irish Times* to publish an article on the Ogoni struggle.

Helen Fallon spoke briefly of the work Maynooth University Library is doing to ring the Ogoni Bells and to embed the story in both in its historical context and in the context of current day events in the Niger Delta and other parts of the world. This includes signing a contract, in 2018 with an American Film company who plan to use the book in the making of a film about the life of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Sister Majella noted the appropriateness of Kildare as the first venue on a national schedule. She first visited Kildare in 1995 to attend the AFri (Action From Ireland) conference, to mark Féile Bríd. At that event she spoke about the problems in Ogoni, highlighting the situation regarding the Ogoni 9, then in military detention. This was the first Irish public platform to talk about the issue and on that day Ogoni Solidarity Ireland was born. In her speech, Sister Majella drew on United Nations scientific research to give a stark description of the ongoing pollution of the Niger. “This exhibition is very important both to tell the Ogoni story, which continues and as an exposure of multinational business practices,” she concluded.

For twelve years Ogoni Solidarity Ireland ran annual seminar to commemorate the Ogoni 9. This role has now been taken on by Maynooth University Library who organise an annual Ken Saro-Wiwa seminar each November to coincide with the anniversary of the execution of the Ogoni 9.

Louise Walsworth Bell, Paper Conservator and Ciara Joyce, Archivist, Maynooth University Library, collaborated on creating the travelling exhibition.

Commenting on creating the exhibition Louise remarked:

**“The most important thing to get across in this exhibition was Ken Saro-Wiwa’s humanity, his courage and perseverance even though he knew his fate was sealed. Although the communication is one sided, in that we don’t have the letters Sister Majella sent to Saro-Wiwa, there is a strong sense of the high regard the two had for each other and their commitment to expose government and corporate injustice. The collection is in very good condition. It was one of the first archives from Maynooth University Library to be digitised. Captions are based on the key elements of each letter. A slideshow of images depicting the destruction of Ogoni, the relief effort – part-funded by Trócaire, and current day images of members of the Saro-Wiwa family who have visited Maynooth University, were also selected for the exhibition.”**

The exhibition included books written by Saro-Wiwa, a travel book by his daughter Noo and copies of *Silence Would Be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa* edited by Íde Corley, Helen Fallon and Laurence Cox. Initially published in 2013, and launched by Dr Owens Wiwa, brother of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the second edition was launched in 2018.

An open access ebook is available at: <http://eprints.maynoothuniversity.ie/8940/>

Comments from the public in relation to the exhibition included;

**“Wonderful to see such an interesting exhibition in Athy – I hope it will be shown elsewhere as well”**

**“A fantastic collection of photographs and facts – brings the story to life”.**

### School Visits

The exhibition ran for six weeks and local primary school classes visited. It was particularly relevant to them in relation to environmental awareness. Teachers remarked that issues such as climate change and recycling are becoming more important in today’s classrooms, noting that most topics covered in the National School Debate Competition are typically on issues such as “Why we should all give up meat to prevent climate change” and “Why we should penalise people for not recycling”.

### Travelling Exhibition

This is the first Irish exhibition of material from the collection. The exhibition travelled to Quinnipiac University for a six-month exhibition in 2016. Libraries interested in hosting the exhibition should contact [helen.b.fallon@mu.ie](mailto:helen.b.fallon@mu.ie); tel: 01 708 3880