



# Nigerian Hero Remembered

Helen Fallon  
and  
Dr. Anne O'Brien

**O**n 10<sup>th</sup> November 2015, Noo Saro-Wiwa visited Maynooth University to launch the Ken Saro-Wiwa Postgraduate Award and to read from her book *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria*.

Noo was interviewed by Dr Anne O'Brien for the Maynooth University Ken Saro-Wiwa Audio Archive, a collection of recordings of people connected to Ken Saro-Wiwa, including his brother Dr Owens Wiwa and Sister Majella McCarron OLA. The donation of the death row correspondence – from Ken Saro-Wiwa to Sister Majella, to Maynooth University Library, was covered in the April 2014 issue of *Africa*.

Noo Saro-Wiwa left Nigeria in 1978, when she was almost two years old. "Growing up in England it was all about watching cartoons, and getting on our bicycles and riding around the neighbourhood. Just very ordinary, everyday things, watching TV adverts, and seeing board games that we wanted, sometimes we'd get them for Christmas and that was amazing. Yeah, very ordinary and fun," she recounted.

Ken Saro-Wiwa established the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), to protest peacefully about the environmental destruction of his homeland Ogoni, in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, by the international petrochemical industry. While his family lived in England he still worked out of Port Harcourt.

"My father would come over every couple of months or so. He'd bring us chocolates, if he'd come via Switzerland he'd bring us these nice Swiss chocolates. You'd come back from school and he'd have his own homework set for us. He'd go out and buy textbooks and we'd have to sit down and work on these textbooks. Mainly to do with English language and things like that. So, yeah he always believed that idle hands are the Devil's hands. And so, sometimes he'd come into your room and just give you a book to read. I often really enjoyed the books, I discovered authors that way."

During the summer holidays Ken brought his family back to his home village, Bana in Ogoni, for a holiday. "I was never a massive fan of the village. Those visits highlighted the fact that we children weren't fluent in Khana. Obviously as an adult, going back, we saw areas of the village that were really beautiful. There was the river, which you'd approach from a height and you were looking down and it was fringed with mangroves. Really stunning, and it is such a shame that such a beautiful area, so full of wildlife and animals and plants, is neither a tourist destination nor a healthy agricultural area. That's a real tragedy."

Afraid that MOSOP's protests would spread and threaten the lucrative revenue the then Nigerian government was getting, Noo's father was harassed and periodically put in military detention. Noo was aware of the dangers he faced. "When I was 16, he

wrote a letter to me when I was at boarding school, and he said that the military government could kill him. And I was really angry because I thought he was being over-dramatic and scaremongering. But he knew the risks, and made sure that we knew the risks. But I guess I really didn't understand what he was up against until the actual night he was killed. He went to prison in 1993 and he was there for a month, and then he was let out again. Nigeria was that kind of place; it was a military dictatorship, people were in and out of prison. But also my father had a way of, not making light of things, but you know he took things on the chin and he didn't allow

being in prison stop him from focusing on what I would consider relatively trivial matters. In the archive here in Maynooth University, I was reading his letters to Sister Majella and he was talking to her about the Troubles in Northern Ireland and how heartened he was that some progress had been made in negotiations. That's what he was like, he didn't focus entirely on his predicament.

He had an interest in what was going on around the world, and within the family. When someone is like that, they make it easy for you to underestimate the danger ahead.”

Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1995 with eight colleagues (the Ogoni Nine). Noo was 19.

“Well I was a second year university student at King's College London and he was sentenced to death – my father and his colleagues – on October 31<sup>st</sup>. So that came as a real shock, but then the international community really rallied round, so come November 10<sup>th</sup> it was just another day within that particular period. I must have attended classes, and then I went and did some shopping and I came back to the house I was living in in North London and my housemate had left a message, just a handwritten note on the table saying 'call your mother' and so I called my mother and she was the one who told me. I just put down the phone, which was the same reaction I had when I was told that my little brother died two years previously, I just put down the phone. And then went home immediately to my mother's house and spent the evening with the family; my cousins and my aunt and uncle came over.”



**Noo Saro-Wiwa reads from her book *Looking for Transwonderland, Travels in Nigeria*. Seated, left to right: Helen Fallon, Deputy Librarian, Graham Kay, Maynooth History student, and Sr Majella McCarron OLA. (Photos: ©Alan Monahan, Maynooth University Library)**

“ Well I was a second year university student at King's College London and he was sentenced to death –my father and his colleagues – on October 31<sup>st</sup>. So that came as a real shock, but then the international community really rallied round...”

Noo returned to Nigeria in 2000. The bodies of the Ogoni Nine had been dumped in unmarked graves.

“It was my father's 'mock funeral', as it were. I think in Ogoni culture people don't feel that a spirit's soul has rested until the person has been buried and so we thought we'd go through the motions of a burial even though we hadn't received his remains at that point. So we went back for maybe a week and a half. And then the next time we went was five years after that, in 2005, and by then we did have his remains and we buried him properly.”

When she was 25 Noo decided she wanted to be a travel writer. “I hadn't really been back to Nigeria apart from those two brief visits for my father's mock funeral and then actual burial. Time had passed, and we now had a democracy. The military dictatorship was gone. There was an element of optimism within Nigeria, and it seemed a more hospitable place generally. Because so much time had passed, I felt ready to go back and I was really curious because I had spent a lot of time travelling in other countries around Africa on holidays as well as writing travel guidebooks. And it suddenly occurred to me that actually Nigeria is a place that I could travel around in the same way that I had done in Ghana, and Madagascar etc. That realisation was actually quite exciting. The idea that I could just jump on a minibus and travel from city to city was a really novel idea. I





**Library Staff with Noo Saro-Wiwa: left to right, Hugh Murphy, Barbara McCormack, Susan Durack, Noo Saro-Wiwa, Helen Fallon, Roisin Berry, and Ciara Joyce.**  
 (Photos: ©Alan Monahan, Maynooth University Library)

thought this was a really good way of re-connecting with Nigeria, and doing it that way didn't remind me of my father's death. Riding on camels in Kano, getting on boats along the river outside Calabar, being in the mountains in Obudu; doing all those sorts of things, I saw a different side to Nigeria and I was really able to disassociate being in Nigeria from my father's murder. So it was a great trip in that respect. It was infuriating in its own way, but I really, really enjoyed it. It took the sting out of the word 'Nigeria' for me. It was a sort of therapy that I needed."

Noo visited the Maynooth University Library exhibition to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her father's execution and viewed a number of items – including her father's letters.

"I was just really amazed and grateful that there are people here dedicated enough to put together an archive like that. You know, just to preserve my father's memory in that kind of way, it's wonderful. It really reminds you of his struggle. Even though you're aware of it, you think about it every hour of every day, seeing his writings there and having the audio recordings, of my uncle Owens and Sister Majella, you know it really brings home to you what the struggle is all about. It's wonderful, I'm so glad we have this resource. I really like the tablet screens in the exhibition area where you can look at his letters and some of the photographs of Ogoniland that Sr Majella McCarron took in the 1990s and whatnot. So you know it's a wonderful way of capturing that part of history and reminding people about the struggle. I'm so, so grateful and I want to spread the word about this archive."



At a moving ceremony on the evening of the 10<sup>th</sup> November Noo Saro-Wiwa presented the Ken Saro-Wiwa Postgraduate Award to Maynooth History student Graham Kay. The award was funded from sales of *Silence Would be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa*. Graham's PhD thesis will explore the relationship between governments and the oil industry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. ■

The full interview is available on the Maynooth University Library website (Ken Saro-Wiwa Audio Archive). The Audio Archive is a collaboration between Maynooth University and Kairos Communications.

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at Maynooth University. With MU colleagues, she edited the death row correspondence of Ken Saro-Wiwa to Sister Majella McCarron OLA, which was published as *Silence Would be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa*. She has worked with Dr Anne O'Brien on producing the Ken Saro-Wiwa Audio Archive, a web-based collection of recordings of people connected with Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Dr Anne O'Brien is academic director with Kairos Communications/ Centre for Media Studies, Maynooth University. Her main research interests are the politics of development and the role of media in social change. Her book *The Politics of Tourism Development* examines the role played by state and private sector politics in development in Ireland.