
Helen Fallon recalls the day Maynooth College Library proudly received the papers of the great humanitarian, Ken Saro-Wiwa

Letters from the Breadbasket

On 10th November 2011, Sister Majella McCarron OLA handed over a collection of personal correspondence she received from Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, in the two years leading up to his execution alongside eight other colleagues. This followed a trial before a special tribunal which contravened several key international standards for a fair trial and provoked international outrage. Saro-Wiwa was leading a non-violent campaign against the environmental destruction of his homeland in the Niger Delta by the international petrochemical industry. The letters to Sister Majella were smuggled out of his Port Harcourt detention centre in breadbaskets and provide rich detail on the ongoing struggle to protect the Niger Delta, the growing political instability in Nigeria and the importance of his friendship with a nun from Country Fermanagh during the final chapter of his life.

Ken Saro-Wiwa was born in 1941 at Bori, Rivers State, Nigeria, into an ethnic group called the Ogoni. This group who number about half a million, live in a small region – 12 miles by 32 – in the South East, the Niger Delta region, of Nigeria. Ogoniland has more than 100

oil wells, a petrochemical complex and two oil refineries.

Ken Saro-Wiwa is the author of poetry, short stories, novels, children's books and various pieces of journalism. Much of his fiction addressed current Nigerian socio-political and economic issues. As a student at the University of Ibadan, he was involved in amateur dramatics; his first creative works were plays, but instead of writing for the stage, he chose to produce work for radio and television.

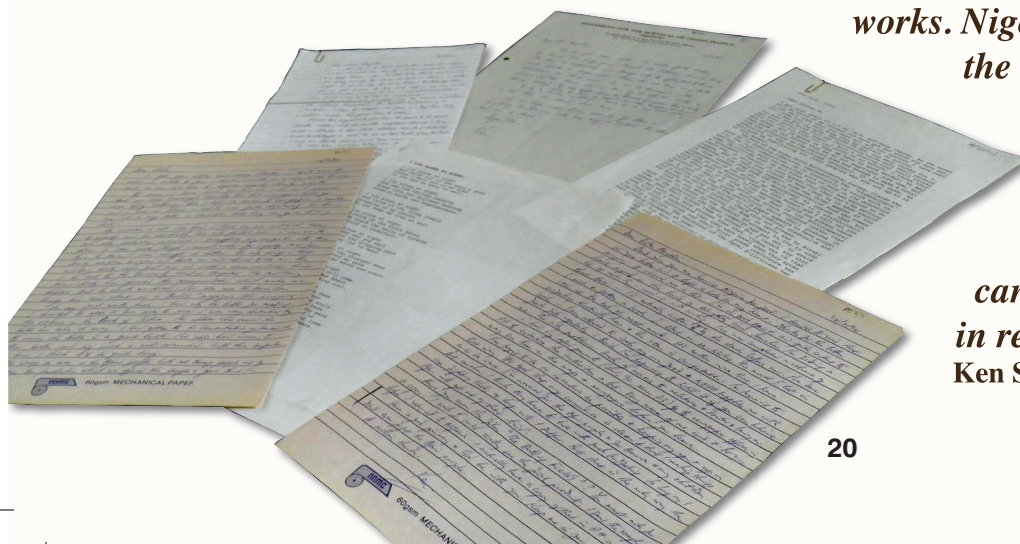
He was writer, producer and director of *Basi and Company: A Modern African Folktale*, an immensely popular television series satirising the get-rich-quick mentality of his countrymen. The series ran from 1985 to 1990 and attracted an estimated 30 million viewers per week.

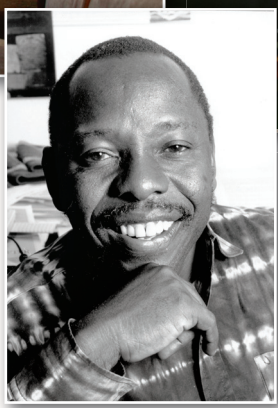
The political and economic concerns of Nigeria are reflected in his novels. They include *On a Darkling Plain*: an account of the Nigerian Civil War and *Sozaboy: A Novel In Rotten English* (1985) which makes an

“In the month since you left, I see the situation in Northern Ireland has improved tremendously. The possibility of peace is so comforting. I hope it happens. Twenty-five years is a long time to be fighting, surely. God grant that it works. Nigeria has progressively gone down the drains to its worst possible nadir.

With all sensible newspapers banned, a lot of people in detention and laws which establish that the dictatorship cannot be challenged in court, we are in real trouble, to say the least.”

Ken Saro-Wiwa





acute observation of the Nigerian civil war, written in a language that rejects so-called standard English. *Prisoner of Jeps* (1988) and *Pita Dunbrok's Prison* (1991) are both concerned with political and moral corruption in postcolonial Nigeria in the 1980s. *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (1995) gives a record of his arrest in July 1993, and the story of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). It includes letters smuggled into the detention centre from around the world, from Nelson Mandela, Ethel Kennedy and Anita Roddick among others. Saro-Wiwa also wrote short stories and poems, many dealing with the crisis of politics and nationalism.

Sister Majella McCarron, originally from Derrylin, Co. Fermanagh, first met Ken Saro-Wiwa when she worked as a missionary in Nigeria with the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles. In 1990, while teaching in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lagos, she was given a mandate from the Africa/Europe Faith and Justice Network (AEFJN) to monitor Western trade activity that was having a detrimental effect on Africa. The oil problem in the Niger Delta was severe at the time, with major environmental damage being wrought by oil extraction. She selected this project, not realising how big it was to become.

In 1993, following the establishment, of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), Sister Majella introduced Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP to the DELTA (Development Education and Leadership

Pictured at NUI Maynooth are, left to right: Cathal McCauley, the Librarian, Professor Philip Nolan, the President, Sister Majella McCarron OLA and Helen Fallon, the Deputy Librarian. "The donation of the Ken Saro-Wiwa (left) archive by Sister Majella to the Library at NUI Maynooth, is a very significant event. I know that generations of students and researchers will derive great benefit from this wonderful gift," commented Cathal McCauley. Above, left: Visitors at the exhibition. (Photos: © NUI Maynooth Library)

Training in Action) programme. Kiltegan Father Tommy Hayden attended the preparatory meeting. The first phase of leadership training was in 1993. While a second phase was planned for 1994, this was cancelled amid an outbreak of hostilities, turmoil and destruction. It was an extremely dangerous time. The Biafran war and the expulsion of the missionaries were still very prominent in people's minds. The special security forces were very active and to be seen visiting the office of Saro-Wiwa was dangerous. "Anyone protesting in a military dictatorship places themselves in a dangerous position," Sister Majella commented. She wrote observations on the Ogoni Movement, while Ken Saro-Wiwa gave her regular updates and was to see her as a contact with the outside world – a way of getting his ideas out. "Ken and I used to talk at length about the problems concerning the Ogoni people. He appreciated my analysis and thoughts. I think he felt I was a benign, spiritual presence. I was a trusted witness," Sister Majella remarked.

In late 1994 she returned to Ireland, planning to stay for about a year and hoping to work on the Northern Ireland conflict. By then Ken Saro-Wiwa had been arrested along with other members of MOSOP. Sister Majella was forced to decide whether she would walk away from the Ogoni cause or continue to support Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight colleagues. As a missionary

she felt she should stick with the issue and its consequences, making every effort to save the lives of the Ogoni Nine. Despite major international efforts Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others were executed on November 10th, 1995. Ken's son, also called Ken, carried what was to be the final letter of almost thirty, to Sister Majella on the 14th September. She was also to receive much of Ken's final poetry from detention, which remains to be published.

Ken Saro-Wiwa is considered to be one of the great humanitarian figures of the late 20th century and his letters reflect his passion for peace and justice around the world. He and Sister Majella both wished for peace in their respective homelands.

In the letters, Ken talks about the political situation in Nigeria; about the Ogoni; about completing a collection of short stories and about cooking his own food. In a letter dated December 1st, 1993, he urges Majella to "keep putting your thoughts on paper. Who knows how we can use them in future. The Ogoni story will have to be told!"

Sixteen years following Ken Saro-Wiwa's execution, on the anniversary of his death, Professor Philip Nolan,

President of NUI Maynooth, accepted the letters from Sister Majella on behalf of the University, saying the collection cast a very human eye on what was one of the late 20th century's most troubling geopolitical issues. Sister Majella first made contact with the University Library through a sociology student, John O'Shea, who interviewed her for his thesis.

The collection comprises thirty letters, some unpublished poetry and seven video cassettes. The letters date from 20th October 1993 to July 1995. Work has begun on cleaning and repairing any documents that require attention, cataloguing each item and transferring the letters into acid free package materials – all the essential background work prior to making this collection available to researchers. These letters will be studied by researchers in a wide range of disciplines – geography, sociology, politics, development studies, African Studies, literature – all of which are represented in the courses offered by NUI Maynooth. Through the letters the Ogoni story will be told. ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

Don't forget...
July 8th

FAMILY DAY 2012



**Sunday, July 8th,
St. Patrick's, Kiltegan, Co Wicklow**

Join us for Mass at 12 noon, followed by picnic (bring and share)
Afternoon Tea, Music and chat.

*A fun-filled afternoon with Horse and Gig trips,
Bouncy Castles, Games and Sports,
Mission Displays, Shop,
Family Treasure Hunt and more!*

All are Welcome



st. patrick's missionary society
the kiltegan fathers

christ's love urges us on
welcome to the website of st. patrick's missionary society.
we are an international missionary society engaged in preaching the gospel of jesus christ.

Please visit the recently relaunched website for St Patrick's Missionary Society at

www.spms.org

It includes a special section for

Africa

where you can see some of your favourite articles from the past and extended photo galleries.
You can also download the latest General Knowledge Crossword and Wordsearch.

And to keep in touch with us, please follow us on Facebook and Twitter. You will see buttons for this on the website.