

The Annual Ken Saro-Wiwa Memorial Seminar 2010. Riverbank Hotel, Wexford Town 12/13 November

On the 10th November 1995 a group concerned about the lives of the Ogoni Nine had planned a vigil of advocacy outside the Nigerian Embassy on Lesson Park in Dublin. A sign bearing Ken Saro- Wiwa Park was to be brought along and hung over the official name for the duration of the vigil. During the day news filtered through from Nigeria that the Ogoni Nine had been hanged early on the morning of the 10th in the prison yard to which they had been taken from a military detention camp in the previous hours.

The vigil of advocacy became a wake on a dark wild rainfilled night in Ken Saro-Wiwa Park to which the best of Ireland's literary figures brought their offerings. It was the end of an almost year long Irish campaign for clemency led by Majella Mc Carron who had returned from Nigeria in August 1994 after thirty years there. For the previous two years she had been in solidarity with the objectives of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni people. By 10 November 1995 several Irish campaign groups were helping and in so doing were learning about the plight of resource - rich indigenous communities like the Ogoni.

The Ogoni live in the Niger Delta of Nigeria alongside many other small ethnic groups. The delta is an oil and gas rich terrain both on and offshore. From 1958 to 1993 Royal Dutch Shell had harvested huge profits from its oil and gas wells onshore. Still there was no electricity, no pipeborne water and more and more land was being acquired for exploration and then lost to pollution. The Nigerian State was complicit in this situation even if it had wisely decided on a sixty percent share or thereabouts when it set up a State oil company shortly after Independence in 1960. The indigenous communities remained in great poverty and were generally ignored by State and Company.

For many years Ken Saro-Wiwa had addressed this situation in his writings both as a novelist and poet, as a television scriptwriter and a newspaper satirist. And then he led his people on to the village paths with waving palms to state their case in a goodhearted but determined way. At one point after a woman had lost an arm by the bullet of a security operative as she farmed her land and defied the progress of a Shell contractor, Saro-Wiwa declared Shell persona non grata, a situation which remains in place 16 years on.

Immediately the security apparatus of the State went into action, local agitations were orchestrated and Ken was arrested and placed in the first of several detentions. Many activists had to flee and other local people went into hiding, some as refugees over neighbouring borders. During the brief campaign from 4 January 1993 to May 1994 the Internal Security Task Force specially set up by the State terrified the local population. The Ogoni Nine were arrested on charges related to the murder of four chiefs and were tried by a special military tribunal which condemned them to death. There was no appeal.

This account has taken shape in books and films over the years. The Annual Ken Saro-Wiwa Memorial Seminar has happened for each of the 14 years since that first vigil/wake. It provides a space to consider how the Ogoni inspiration has continued and how it has or can influence similar situations as the Shell-led Corrib Gas Project in Mayo. It seeks to tell about multinational methods of making more and more profit. Ogoni inspiration in the Shell to Sea campaign is reflected in Lorna Siggins' *Once Upon A Time In the West: The Corrib Gas Controversy* (Transworld Ireland, 2010).

The theme of the 2010 Seminar is the recording and safeguarding of facts.

Angus Mitchell, Oxford-trained historian, will reflect on the facts unearthed by the commissioned investigations which Roger Casement undertook both in the Congo and the Amazon. These investigations were a response to public outcries about the exploitation of

indigenous communities forced into the production of rubber for Western companies. Mitchell edited *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (Lilliput, Dublin, 1997).

The use of unregulated force is taken up in the second lecture where Dr Vicky Conway of Queen's University, Belfast alerts us to *The Blue Wall of Silence* (Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 2010) which, she claims in her book of that title, surrounds the administration of policing in Ireland. She illustrates this with reference to the Morris Tribunal to arrive at and record her conclusions.

Besides the book, amateur recording of facts has played a vital role in the Corrib Gas Project. Terence Conway of Shell to Sea will illustrate the use of video in protest situations and how it is used as an antidote to prodigious police footage. Video records are a particular feature of the Shell to Sea campaign and fulfilled a role later complemented by observation and monitoring carried out by the Table Observers and Frontline and in which Amnesty International and at least one US based team are reported to be interested.

Researchers at various academic levels are carrying out research projects somewhat related to the exploitation of local communities such as the impact of the Corrib Gas Project. These are invited as guests to a panel coordinated by Amanda Slevin currently engaged in doctoral research. The panel is drawn from three universities and from An Taisce. Ongoing research has reached a stage of future collation, a responsibility to safeguard the findings and to share with the affected communities .

The final session will address the issue of funding research while safeguarding facts. This is provoked by the Shell-funded United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) survey/report of oil pollution in Ogoni which is due out this coming December and to the preview of which many voluntary campaigns such as Amnesty International have reacted with scepticism as have Ogonis themselves. Majella Mc Carron will outline the history of this report and refer to others that have appeared since 2008.

On the first evening after the first presentation there will be a Ken Saro-Wiwa Memorial Moment. It will include poetry and prose, picture and music.

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