SILENT VOICES

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Contents

Preface

Silent Voices is a collection of personal stories. The contributors are people who have in some way been affected by Partition or the 'Troubles' in Ireland or by conflict elsewhere in the world. All have a specific Sligo connection although the stories are not all set in Sligo. The stories reflect the people who told them and it is their own voice and words that you read in this book. The stories were told to an interviewer and later edited by that interviewer in collaboration with the storyteller. What you read here is the final distillation from that process.

This collection does not set out to represent a definitive view of any event, person or place. It simply tells you, the reader, how the events recounted impacted on the storyteller. Some things you read may make you feel uncomfortable; some may make you feel sad. Others may cause you to laugh or smile or bring to mind friends lost, wisdom gained, times past. For some readers the events in the stories will be part of history, and maybe for many of us little bits of history will emerge through these pages that are made new by being told from a different perspective.

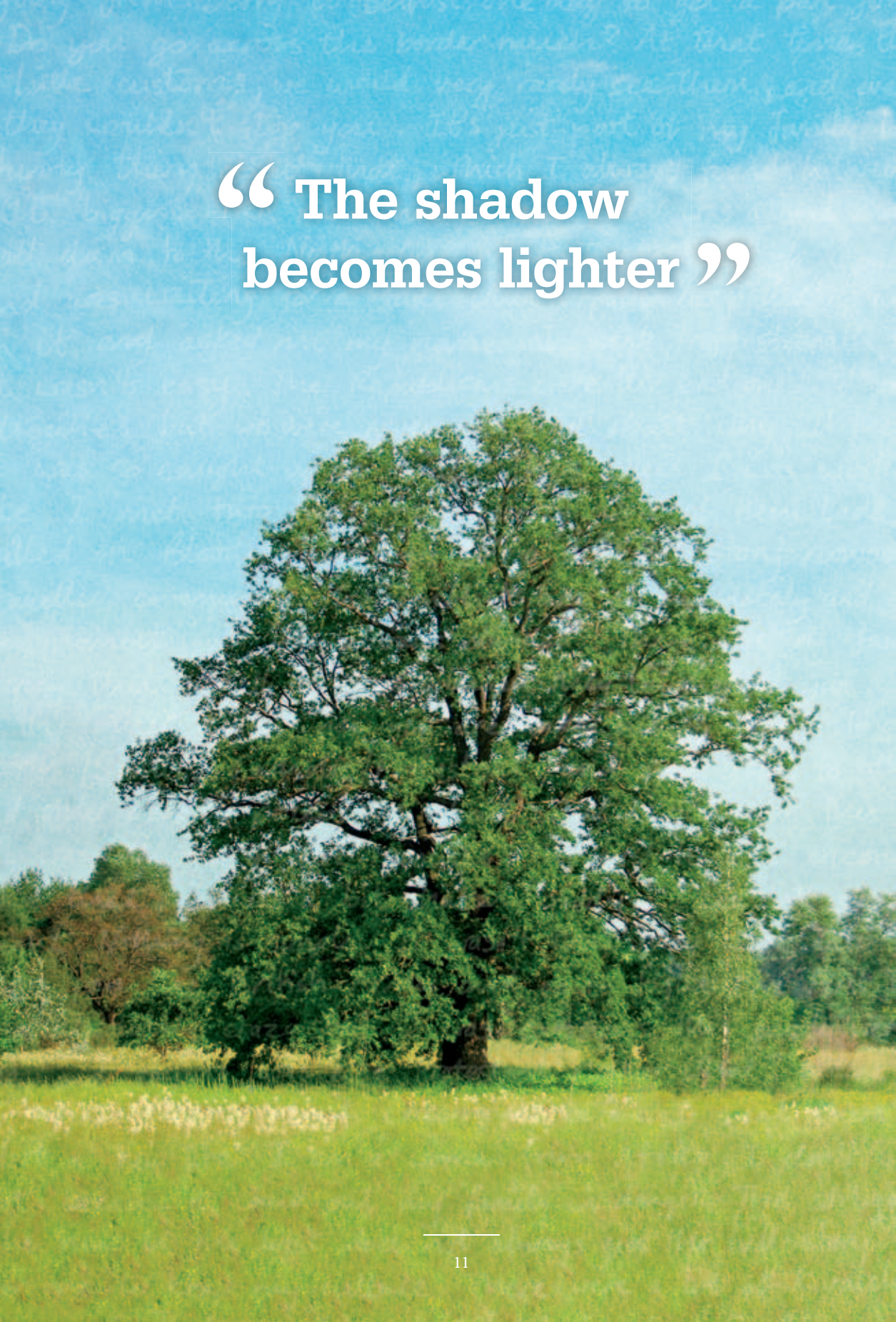
Storytelling is about individual truth telling. It is not about setting any record straight and does not presume that there is a 'true story'. There are many true stories and for every story here there are dozens more untold stories that make us who we are in Sligo in 2011.

Storytelling is a way to make sense of things that have been outside our understanding, or beyond us. Telling is cathartic, it brings closure to the storyteller and many of the contributors reported strong feelings of relief associated with speaking their own truth to another person whose only job was to listen and record what was being said. It takes courage to tell our stories, especially if they are

hard to hear. As you make your way through this book remember that the contributors are just ordinary people trying to live their lives as best they can.

All contributions are anonymous, except where the substance of the contribution demands otherwise. The experiences recounted touch on universal themes associated with the impacts of conflict. Many names, places and other identifying references have been changed in the stories. Images used have been mainly chosen by the contributors.

Nothing is sanitised or tweaked to make it acceptable to any group or viewpoint and it may well be that you will read something in these pages that will make you think again about something and cause you to look at people and events in a different way. If that is so, the collection has done its work.


“ The shadow
becomes lighter ”

The shadow becomes lighter

I was an active Republican, an IRA volunteer. That was one of the activities I was charged and convicted with in the special court. I was a member of Fianna Eireann, when I was young guy, maybe for four years. Fianna Eireann is the Irish Republican Scout movement. In the Fianna, I had access to a history that wasn't taught in schools and that taught me about the rich heritage that I had.

I'm the only Republican in my family, a leaflet came around one day and my father says, 'would you like to join the Fianna?' And I just went. I had a rough idea what it was about alright because things were very active up in the six counties at the time. So it was never far from your ear – especially if there were IRA people in the area that you would know about. All the kids would know about them, as a legend, you know in that kind of way – 'What's his name down the road, Jesus, he nearly got caught up in Derry'.

We were only 11 and you know, boys are always looking for heroes – girls as well I would imagine. So yeah; we drilled, we discussed history, which was a great thing because that wasn't the kind of thing you had in the Scouts. Scouts was just about camping and getting badges and learning knots. I'm an expert at knots and history!

I remember the time of the hunger strikes – I was in secondary school. People knew the few of us in school who were in the Fianna, it wasn't that we were people to be reckoned with or anything like that, but we stood apart because of who we were, we were always talking about what was going on in the six counties and things were pretty active in Britain at the time. During the hunger strikes we went into the cloakroom and ripped all the black lining out of the coats, made armbands and sold them to the rest of the lads in the school and then sent the money to An Cumann Cabharach which looked

after prisoners' families. We got into trouble – not for ripping the lining out – but for actually wearing the armbands at school. This was the Christian Brothers who had basically put this Republican thing into our heads from first class! Anyway, it wasn't too long after the hunger strikes that I joined Sinn Féin. We would have had a very active Cumann, a young Cumann. Sinn Féin at the time was a party of agitation.

We sold the Republican News[1] because we were young, vociferous and fundamentalist in our ideals and the ideals of the world. We sold them Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday morning and Sunday night. We carried them with us during the week and gave one to anybody who wanted one; on the bus or standing at the bus stop or outside the fire station or wherever, that's how we spread the word. And we had clinics, mobile clinics in caravans, for people to come and talk – not to us because we were only youngsters, 17, 18 or 19. We were there to be used basically and our politicisation from the Fianna carried through into having very deep and radical political discussions within Sinn Féin, and of course the focal point for that always went towards the Ard Fheis.

Those years were fairly hectic within Sinn Féin because you had the changeover in the early 80s. Then in '86 you had the walkout, split, and what became Republican Sinn Féin who walked out of the Mansion House, singing 'Take it Down from the Mast Irish Traitor'. I'll never forget it because I was up on the roof doing security, looking down at Adams shaking O'Brádaigh's hand. We had a difference of opinion within our Cumann – we had a very large Cumann but we decided that we would go by the vote of the day and none of us would walk out. None of us did even though some people left later, but nobody walked out of the Ard Fheis, because there was no point. The movement was riven with splits down the years and even up to today. The focus was on ensuring that the splits were kept to a minimum or that the impact of splits was kept to a minimum.

I was working as an apprentice electrician. I was deeply affected by what was going on, not just in the six counties, you know, but in the rest of the country. Several times a year I went up to Belfast for commemorations. The community up there is amazing, the strength is amazing. You stay in someone's house, you become part of the family,

[1] An Phoblacht / Republican News is a weekly Republican newspaper.

that's basically the way it is. You go up there – you're like a chicken without a head because you haven't a clue about what's going on. When they came down I'd make sure they knew what was going on. We were going by the Harcourt St. cop station in a bus one day and we had kids in the front seat because they had never been on a double-decker bus. Going past, I said, 'there is the Garda headquarters' – they said, 'oh really, has it been hit many times?' You know, that's the way they looked at it. The barracks up there, it was about a record, you know how many times the barracks was hit. Straightaway, they were going for the assumption that the headquarters had been bombed out.

There was always stuff happening you know – it was the 'shoot to kill' time. Everyday I listened to the news. I switched from station to station from when the news began at 5.30 'til seven and the Channel 4 news – that was my TV.

You join Sinn Féin and you are done by association straightaway. Because as soon as you walked out of your Cumann meeting, the Special Branch are outside, and they are hungry and salivating at the mouth to see new members and they'd be in straightaway. They would search you, abuse you. If you were in the car, it would be like the Flintstones, the seats would be out on the road straightaway. They'd be poking holes in this, that and the other pulling the upholstery out. It was just pure abuse and harassment you know. A tactic which you can understand as well – same as around the world. But it had the opposite effect to what the servants of the state wanted. They want to scare people off, but it had the opposite effect, in my opinion and in my experience.

At work, the Special Branch would be in there straightaway – trying to discredit you to the bosses. You would think that the boss would come and say 'I've been told that you're in the IRA, you murdering bastard, get out of here'. Total opposite. The knock on the door and they're telling us basically, 'take care'. Sinn Féin, they'd have no problem with – it's a political party – that is my thing – out selling papers, putting up posters, electioneering and the whole lot. I would say, 'I'm in here doing your job as well you know. It doesn't affect you in any way'. They would say 'I'm just afraid of them and they give me a bad name – being outside (of the business premises)'.

But you do what your conscience says at the end of the day. You can't do what the Branch says. They once arrested me and held me

for 48 hours. After the first day, they were telling me everything I had on my walls – in detail – because I was quite artistic – about the stuff beside my bed and in my drawer. They were very good at the psychology thing.

I may have been living out in a flat for a bit of time. Or I may have been back at my parents' house. They would raid the house. They probably couldn't tie you down to any particular flat. You might have one flat where you are working, and one flat where you are signing on, but you might not be living there. That was the nature of things at the time because you'd be doing a bit of running about as an active Republican. They did raid the place, raid the house. To be honest with you, they were never impolite to my mother. My family weren't Republican, they would have been more Labour. But they were never impolite to my family, just me.

My parents and I had a few discussions about the Garda attention to the family home. But basically, my frame of mind at the time was there was not much you could do about it. You could either like it or lump it so in the end I moved out. When I moved out – they (my parents) were never raided again. They seemed to accept it – he's not living there – so we won't raid it. To raid a house, any security force knows that you're not going to keep stuff in your own gaff. So they just went in I suppose to see what sort of personality you had.

I was arrested a few times over a number of years. Then I was captured and convicted in a special court with no jury. Some of us got eight years, one got nine, one got 12 because he had been in prison before. You do six years instead of eight. An old volunteer said to me, 'you join the IRA and you're going to get caught, you're going to get imprisoned, or you're going to get killed'. Another Republican said to me once; 'prison is just another operation – part of being an active service volunteer – so you see it as an operation and you remain focused inside'. So when I went to prison I got involved straightaway with the activities of the unit. The unit, at the time, I think it was 80 odd. The state publicity was that IRA volunteers were you know, guys who'd been brainwashed and hadn't a clue what they were doing, but you had to be totally focused and realistic you know, because wherever you were, there were certain outcomes and you accepted that.

When I was arrested I had a shotgun at the back of my head and my face stuck in the dirt, so the first thing I thought was 'I hope I get

out of this alright.' I didn't care where I was going. Some of the cops that were questioning us, we knew them intimately; we'd been lifted by them and stopped by them on a constant basis, so you had that kind of connection. My main thought was – it's not going to get the better of me, that kind of stuff. They'd be trying all the psychology during questioning but they just didn't understand what was going on, that you were just focused on what lay ahead.

We were told, basically, in the special court downstairs in the holding cells – the barrister, the solicitor, said this may go all the way up to life, so we were kind of calculating what we were going to get. I don't mean we were seeing it as some kind of game, far from it, it was a serious enterprise. But, you know, eight years was okay, it was grand. In the six counties, it was a minimum of 25. In Britain, the minimum was 30. Eight years was fine. That doesn't mean that every day went smoothly inside, in a situation like that, you had a cell to yourself, you had a lot of time to yourself, especially if you were a thinker.

To me, being in prison was just part of the job so to speak. But it broke my mother's heart. It broke all their hearts really. They weren't judgmental in any way, shape or form. It wasn't the kind of family we had. We didn't have a very communicative family, but they weren't judgmental, they were supportive. It wasn't about what I did, it was about who I was. I'm their son. They came to visit me, and even though I may not have had a great relationship with one or the other, they still came to visit me, which makes all the difference when you're in prison. Especially in an oppressive regime. Of course it wasn't as oppressive as it was in the 80s. In the 80s, it was an active regime of battery and oppression but in the 90s it had kind of, well, the screw's wives and spouses had broken the whole campaign of brutality. The screws were responsible for bringing the campaign home to their families. So things were better and we were more organised as well in there.

Prison was another stage in the campaign. It was an education for me, to be honest. It wasn't just education but you can never have too much education, in my opinion, especially if it enhances any sense of realisation and broadens your perspective. I was always good at interacting with people, and I was always creative, so I got into the acting classes. We'd do our own shows, would put on several shows a year and then would have the pantomime at Christmas where you

know, the year was spent gathering intelligence on all the lads, any mishaps were noted! The VEC organised the education there, but the Republican unit had always organised their own education in there as well using the expertise of their own men in the prison. It was the same in Maghaberry, in Armagh – the women's prison, in Long Kesh, in the H-blocks – anywhere Republicans were, it was always active – education and regime. Then the VEC came in and said, 'look, we can streamline this and we can give you classes, tutors and something you haven't done before'. It was brilliant you know. The teachers were very proactive in what they had to give – I suppose having a captive audience was a help.

I was released a year early during the first IRA cessation. I'm lucky that I did get out; I would have gotten out a year later anyway so it's very much a bonus that I had that year. I thought it was very funny, I was nominated to be the spokesperson outside the gate, so I gave a spiel. The next day I went to sign on the dole, I think it was the next day. They gave me all this, you know, 'you have to have a letter of release to specify that you had been released from prison'. I said, 'I'll tell you what, you get the newspapers, you ring Nora Owen[2], she will tell you exactly who I am!' There were only seven of us released.

There was a bit of controversy over our release, public wise, but a lot of people saw it as positive in the sense that it was a proactive and constructive act on behalf of the Free State government, the 26 counties government. They were using it to put pressure on the British to make movement in the negotiations. No prisoner had been released by that stage in the six counties and wouldn't for a further two years.

After my release, people did not act in a negative way. Very much the opposite – 'hold on, well done' – any pub I went into. It was a year of celebration. People going out of their way to recognise who you were. I found that quite weird because years before prison you went out of your way not to let people know unless they were meant to know, and you come out of prison and everybody knows. People that I knew were going out of their way to make it known that they knew.

The ceasefire broke down a year later for a short period of time. I was living in Belfast at the time and it broke down for a couple of months. Remember Canary Wharf and then Manchester and all that

[2] Nora Owen was the Minister for Justice who authorised the early release.

kind of thing? I didn't return. I wasn't involved. I went back to Sinn Féin for a short while but I wanted to get back into education, very much so.

It was a conscious choice choosing a political route which necessitated the use of violence. I couldn't just walk away. I joined the IRA. Activities depended on where you operated as an IRA volunteer. It could be very different in, say Dublin, to what you were involved in, in the likes of the six counties or England. But it didn't matter, it was all in context, you are still active – it didn't matter what you were doing. In a collective sense, you know, when I was doing something as simple as getting a house, I am still responsible for anything that happened. If somebody got shot, it is part of the collective. A senior Republican once said a few years ago in answer to a question, 'are you sorry for people that were killed', you know, on TV. He said 'I take responsibility for everybody that died'. If you're a member of the IRA that was something that you had to do, because the shin bone is connected to the knee bone, or whatever; everything is connected. You mightn't pull the trigger, and you mightn't be bombing up the road, but in some way you're connected.

When you're on active service you're on active service and that was it. Whatever you are doing – you're either planning something, sussing something out, meeting people, getting information, hiding information, whatever you're doing, whether it's before, during or after. So you were active. It wasn't like you do it and then bugger off and make a phone call. Don't get me wrong, I downed a few pints and enjoyed my kebab, you know. Having a sense of humour got you through. It was a serious business. The reality of it was you weren't there because you wanted to march up O'Connell Street with your beret and your gloves and get a medal because you fought in the IRA. Nobody knew you were in the IRA unless they were meant to know. It was a secret, you got no acclaim, you got no credit. No pat on the back saying, 'fair play, well done for doing that.' It was pretty tight – it had to be by its nature.

It was different in Belfast, different in the six counties. Walk down the lane, pushing the pram, who's going to pull a kid with another kid in the pram, would you know that the bottom is full of whatever? It wasn't like that down here. But I had the history, I had the education, that's what I would call it, and others would say I was brainwashed. I didn't see that at all. It was a joyful time as well because I had a

connection that others didn't have to the people in the six counties. I visited them, I played in their houses, I played in the streets, in the fields and wherever else. I often hear that, the kids in the six counties they didn't know what was going on in the 26 counties, they thought it was another galaxy away. The same thing with the kids in the 26 counties, they hadn't a clue what was going on because that was what the government down here at the time, and successive governments, wanted to happen. They wanted it pushed away. They didn't want to be involved. It comes out every year with the 30 year rule – when documents are released. The truth comes out every year – but it's 30 years late. And leaks are coming out now from both sides… a little leak here and there dilutes the impact.

I hoped that my contribution would have an effect – positively. I knew what I was doing here and there wasn't going to bring freedom there and then. But the way I looked at things – me being active meant that it was brought forward a little bit – to create a momentum.

My children didn't know I was involved until I made it known. Our ones engineered it so that I would get out for 36 hours to see them, that was in '94 or something like that. I hadn't seen my son in three years. He knew I was in prison, he was told. In my memory he was sitting on a wall, and he said, 'what are you in prison for', and I said, 'I'm not a criminal. I was an active soldier, and I was fighting for the rights of the people. I'm here, you're here, that's all that matters.' We always had a very strong bond and we still do today, he's an adult. But it was very difficult. I'll never forget – we cried like babies when we were leaving. The two of us cried like babies. My brother brought me down to a pub in Portlaoise, and he lined up six Hennessys on the bar. He made me drink them and took me down to the gate. I got so sick in my cell that night.

I do have regrets about missed time with family but I always lived my life in the moment, especially now. I like the quality of the moment, I like to appreciate the time that I have. No, whatever I did, I did because I believed in it at that moment.

In prison there were a lot of Republican lads who hadn't done time so well. They'd never be left alone; they'd always be helped and counselled. So we were always there for people, always. You had a friend inside, a close friend, somebody who would run around with you. The OC and adjutant would come to you and say 'so and so is doing his whack, having a hard time', and you would take him

round the yard for a few laps, have a chat, and you did it because you'd expect somebody to do it for you. A simple thing like going and sitting down with somebody in the workshop, helping them to do a mirror or get them to help you with a mirror …developing that tight comradeship that you had outside, because outside you didn't have time to dwell on what was going on in here in your head, because you were active all the time whereas inside it was the only thing you had. The struggle for some people was to get away from it.

The strength of comradeship stays with me most about that time. The IRA volunteers were our families – the tradition, the history, your connection to the history, and the benefits that came out of it. Not just for the people in the six counties but for the whole country, the 32 counties. Because things have changed radically. You still have people coming up and saying, 'ah you did fuck-all, and people are still being oppressed up there'. But you look up there now, compared with a few years ago, 10 years ago, 15 years ago, 20 years ago, 30 years ago, and it's radically changed. And people's perception of it down here has changed as well.

We're not just talking about the North you know, not just about North and South, but about East and West. That whole axis. I mean look at how people are viewing Sinn Féin now. I'm going around the doors now canvassing, and I'm battered with the goodwill.

My focus was always on 2016. It's still there in a sense. I was listening to Adams this morning on RTE radio – 'do you see reunification, do you see it by 2016?', and he was saying – 'well, we are in the Dáil, we are in government in the six counties'. If the people stand up for themselves, if they want to be heard, they'll put us in down here even if it is in opposition. We will build. Their antics, their political antics have changed radically. For the better. For the people of the country, completely, perceptions have changed.

Being a former IRA prisoner doesn't define who I am. When I get to know people, I don't go out and tell people I'm a former Republican POW. I don't do that, I never have. But when they find out, when it comes up in conversation maybe a year down the line, and I say, 'I was active in Republican politics', a lot of the time after that, there's been a gradual slithering away – not because they don't like me but because they're scared of that whole world. They slip away ever so slightly, the shadow becomes lighter.

They know you for who you are, they like you for who you are, but they're wary of the IRA thing. I'm still fairly forthright in my views, and I am going to talk about politics. Don't get me wrong, I think everybody is entitled to their opinions. I used to be dogmatic whereas now I'm just opinionated! But I do find that the relationship changes when it comes out, not that I've lost friends as such because they still say to me 'how are you doing', but it wouldn't be so close, it wouldn't be so active. It's fear maybe – fear of being associated. Everyone has their own politics, everyone has their own world view, everybody has their own opinion, you're entitled to it whatever you have. If it's strong enough, it will come out one way or the other.

Losing acquaintances in that way is okay. True friendship doesn't work like that. I have some fantastic friends who are still fantastic friends who wouldn't have been members of the Republican movement. When they found out about me, yes, they were fascinated. Some of them were shocked, but we're still friends, very much so and some much stronger because of that. Because of that sharing. But it's about judgment as well. I accept you are who you are because it's who you are – and I'm not going to judge you – because I don't want to be judged. That's just the way I look at things.

The Republican experience isn't understood. It can't be because you can never fully understand it unless you're involved in it. I know maybe it's a cliché but I think people have fantasised about it, about being an active revolutionary… Che Guevara and all that kind of stuff.

I think people recognise why we were active and they also understand that things are done for specific reasons and specific ideologies. People agree or disagree with things that happened. But I also disagree with things that happened over the years, but you understand the strategy behind it and the mess ups and the mistakes that were made or that somebody got a bit hotheaded.

I was at a writing residential and I was going on about a novel I was writing. I was chatting to this guy and describing a character doing things like I might have been involved in, and this guy said, 'how can you write about that, how do you know about it, have you got experience of that kind of thing?' I said, 'not exactly that specific thing, but I was in prison and I know the mindset' … he said, 'why don't you write it from a Republican perspective as opposed to just someone that has been in prison?' But I explained it's because I don't want to

play off the Republican angle. It's a part of my identity, but I'm more than it.

I still have that security thing in my psyche. I still delete e-mails, I still delete texts, I keep nothing. You know, the text could be 'I'm coming for lunch' then you delete it straightaway. I didn't even have e-mail before I got caught, I didn't have a text number or mobile phone! They only became public in '95. I don't go broadcasting (that I'm a former prisoner) but I'm not ashamed in any way, shape or form. I didn't move to Sligo because I was ashamed of being a Republican. I just wanted somewhere quiet, that I could just 'be' and write and have my family up here.

I don't go out of my way to tell people. Generally I let people know if they're established friends. Or usually they'll hear it because some friends would take it upon themselves to say 'hey lookit, you know, he's done a few years in Portlaoise, you know'. I suppose I'm putting a bad light on it but generally – I've never had anybody say you know, 'fuck you.' Ever. But I have gotten to notice the pattern down the years that when some people find out, contact has gotten less regular. And I put it down to that revelation, and I can understand it, people who are basically your friends know who you are – you are on terms with them, you have whatever you have in common. And all of a sudden this thing is thrown into the hat and it scares people, because you are an albatross, you are someone that was involved in atrocities, you know what I mean? You'll always be painted with that brush which is a lot to do with Section 31 and people being fed 30 years of state propaganda. It has a legacy.

If I didn't have this past then of course I would be different. I wouldn't be who I am. We are, in my opinion, a result of our collective experience, which is part of my reality. I was an active Republican. There were many people who were much more active than me, and I was more active than some. That was me. I believed in what I believed in. It's still a part of me and I'm still a part of it. I'm a Republican, and if you don't like it, you're free to take it or leave it.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks must go above all to the storytellers for their courage and generosity in sharing their personal experiences with us through this publication.

Thanks to Mary Daly, Joni Crone and Marie Crawley, who gathered and edited the stories, for the sensitivity, care and professionalism that they brought to this project.

To the many people who gave of their time to review this publication, thank you for your insight. Thanks also to Tommie Gorman, RTE, for launching this publication.

Special thanks to those who helped steer and guide this project – Bernadette Maughan, Chris MacManus, Marion Brogan, Noel Regan and Sue Hegarty. Thanks also to Peter McKee from Borderlines for sharing his project experience.

Thanks to the Sligo Peace & Reconciliation Partnership Committee who commissioned this project and to the project promoter Sligo County Council In particular, thanks to the assistance provided by Sligo County Library Service and Community & Enterprise Office staff

Thanks also to Jeff Kay of JDK Design for his expertise in designing and printing this publication.

This publication forms part of the work of the Sligo Peace & Reconciliation Action Plan (Phase I) and has been possible thanks to the support of the EU's Peace III Programme.

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The Project has been supported by EU's PEACE III Programme managed for the Special EU Programmes Body by Sligo County Council on behalf of Sligo Peace & Reconciliation Partnership Committee (a sub-committee of the Sligo CDB)

'Silent Voices' is powerful, original, deeply moving - at times searingly so - and gives invaluable insight into what was suffered by real people on this island, and why, over recent decades. This book is also a timely warning against attitudes which would have us bound by the past, rather than bow to it. It is a reminder that, while we cannot change that past, "we have chosen to change the future," as President McAleese has said.

Patsy McGarry,
Religious Affairs Correspondent, The Irish Times

Perception and reality are inseparable themes in these stories of courage, betrayal, resilience, perception and pain. Landscape writer Rebecca Solnit once noted that if a border is natural, it must have no history. The experience of reading 'Silent Voices' bears testimony to that.

Lorna Siggins,
Western Correspondent, The Irish Times

These are stories of ordinary men, women and children who were caught on the wrong side of the line: the Border in the case of the Protestant community; the uniform for the Catholic in the UDR; ethnicity for Travellers and refugees; the perimeter fence for the prisoner. The official record appears superficial and contrived when set alongside these riveting personal stories of loss, displacement, hurt, misunderstanding and endurance.

Paddy Logue, Irish Peace Centre

Secrets, subterfuge and sometimes shocking, these stories reveal a Sligo I barely recognise, but the voices from the grass roots cannot be discounted. The truth in these accounts is unsettling, but rightly so.

Mary Branley