SILENT VOICES

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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.

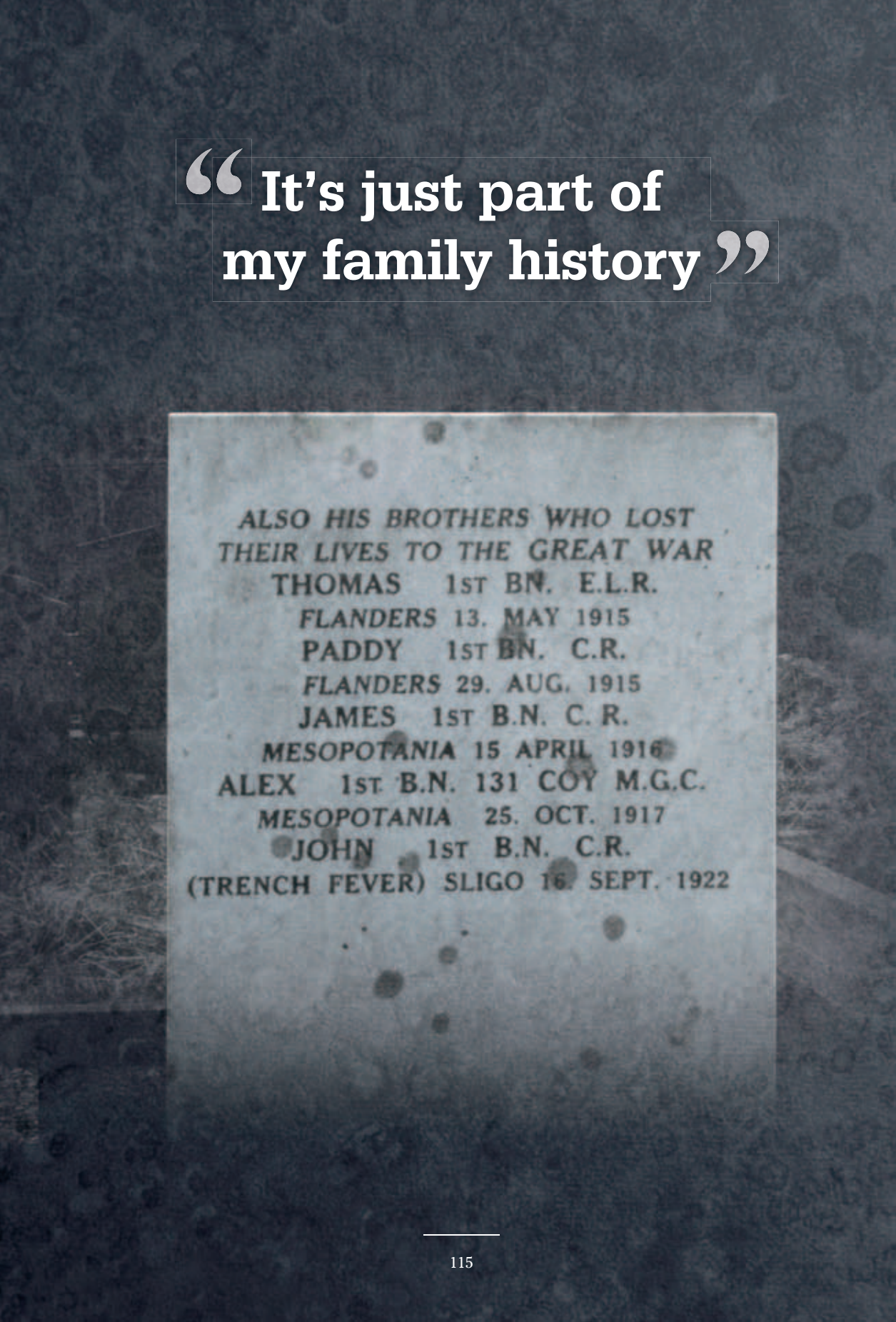
Storytelling is a way to make sense of things that have been outside our understanding, or beyond us. Telling is cathartic, it brings closure to the storyteller and many of the contributors reported strong feelings of relief associated with speaking their own truth to another person whose only job was 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.

“It’s just part of my family history”



It's just part of my family history

This story begins in 1914 and ends in August 1979. My mother's family had a long history of men in the family serving in the British Army. In the First World War eight brothers went to the Front, in British Army uniforms. Four of them were killed in action, one in Belgium, one in France, and two in Iraq – which was then Mesopotamia. One returned home in 1919 with trench fever. He died in 1922, three years after he came back, he just wasted away and died of trench fever. The only time he left his bed from the day he came home, was maybe two days a year on a good summer's day. He was put in an armchair and the armchair was strapped to a horse and cart, and he was brought around the town like that.

So that was five brothers died, and my grandfather then served in the Second World War along with two of his brothers. Luckily they got back alive. So our family has a long history of association with the British Army, particularly the Connaught Rangers, and I grew up in a house with medals in drawers, and plaques and letters, even a picture of Winston Churchill on the wall. We got British Legion coal at Christmas and I remember we got shoes a couple of times. I know my grandfather was sent one time to Dublin – where the British Army had a hospital, to get cataracts off his eyes. I'd say in the Forthill area in Sligo at least one third or one quarter of the houses had British Army pensions when I was a young fella. And we grew up like that. And the funny thing about that, which I always found hilarious, was that the biggest IRA man that I ever knew was a coal man – and he had the contract every year for delivering the British Legion coal at Christmas!

So that was my family history. Now, my grandfather's sister married a man by the name of Bill Hudson, who was a Co Louth man – he was a vet, and they spent the last 30 years of their life living in one of the small cottages that is inside the grounds of Buckingham Palace. He was one of the men that looked after the horses – the Queen's horses, and he would ride on the back of one of these big carriages that the Royal family would come out in, with all the regalia on and the whole lot, any time there was parades on in London or anything.

They had one son and one daughter. In 1979, the son, Bill Jnr., decided he was coming home to Ireland to visit his father's people in County Louth, and his mother's people in Sligo Town. He tossed a coin to decide who he would visit first, and the family in County Louth won the toss, so he headed off to County Louth for the first week.

On the same day in August 1979 that Mountbatten was killed at Mullaghmore, Bill was fishing on a small lake at Omeath in County Louth. Eighteen soldiers were killed at Warrenpoint 400 yards across the lake from him and he was shot dead by the British Army. It was reported on British television for two days following the incident that he was an IRA bomber. His mother and father were living in the grounds of Buckingham Palace, in their home of 30 years, while this was going on.

It is very ironic to think that the grandson of a man, who served in the British Army and lost five brothers, should end up being shot by the British Army.

I was actually in London working at the time it happened. I was 18 years of age, and I worked very hard. I left the house at six in the morning and didn't get home till past seven most evenings. I was working in a factory making 45 gallon drums. You were on a conveyor belt; you had to keep going all day. I was making money, I was paying my aunt in the house, and still I had £70 or £80 every week for myself, but the only night you could go out was a Friday or Saturday night.

I remember my aunt sitting me down on the chair and telling me that her first cousin and my mother's first cousin were after being shot. That some guy called Mountbatten was after being blown away in Sligo, and I couldn't go out. All I remember saying is 'who the effin' hell is Mountbatten? I'm going out; I've been working all week. And I don't know that cousin – what's his name again? Never heard of

him'. All I wanted was out on a Friday night. She had four sons, and I remember two of the older boys pinning me down in the chair and not letting the out. This was in south-east London where there wouldn't have been a huge Irish population, and there was a lot of anger. I knew a family round the corner, from Galway, who had their windows smashed. But to me at 18 years of age, I didn't know what they were talking about.

I remember my aunt nearly crying in the corner, begging me not to go out of the door. She was afraid, that I would go down to the pub with my Irish accent, where I would be the only Irish one there among staunch English, National Front tattoos on their arm – this was the Isle of Dogs and Millwall, and she was afraid for me. I kept saying to her, 'I don't care, next weekend I'm going out, I don't care who was blown up'.

Sligo was on the news then and before that no one had ever heard of Sligo. All of a sudden everyone where I lived and worked knew where Sligo was and what had happened to Mountbatten but that didn't worry me, my only worry was getting out the door at the weekends.

It was only years later, when I came home and realised that the lad was shot dead and his mother and father were living at Buckingham Palace at the time, that all these soldiers were killed, and Mountbatten was blown away – it was only then that I realised that it was a historic event. Maybe it left a bad imprint in people's minds about Sligo, about Sligo as a bad place.

I just think it's like a wheel or a circle that has gone round. It's just part of my family history, but I think it's very apt that during the Troubles, members of a family who served the British Army in the First World War, Irish families, doing what they thought was the right thing to do, ended up with a family member being shot by the British Army. So it kind of brings a tragic end to a family story that was obviously caused by the conflict up the North.

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'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