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.

“One event changed my life forever”

One event changed my life forever

My connections with Sligo go back over nine years. I have a lot of connections through my work with Sligo and Donegal but when I come to relax with family and friends my base is Mullaghmore. I love Mullaghmore. I go there for peace and quiet. Sometimes half of Omagh is there when you're out walking. I suppose that's why they call it 'little Omagh' because so many people come here on holidays and short breaks. Another favourite spot of mine is the Seaweed Baths in Strandhill.

For me it's a place of peace, to go for walks round the Head or on the beach. It's amazing how many Omagh people you will meet there. If I meet someone I know we'll have a wee witter and ask 'how are you? Are you down for the weekend or just for the day?' But when I'm there I don't like to spend a lot of time talking to people. For me it's a place to go for peace and tranquillity.

For people in the North to come South on residential weekends is such a relief – to get away from tension and stress. On the Sunday, going back, you can see their faces changing. You can see the stress coming back again because they know what they're going back into – so much strain. When people come for the first time, from Belfast say, to Mullaghmore, they can't believe it that maybe a hundred miles down the road is this lovely peaceful place, where it doesn't matter if you are Catholic or Protestant. Nobody passes any remarks. I still find the same thing happening myself. Once I go over the border into Sligo, my shoulders relax and slowly the tension drains away. Maybe it's the sea air that helps.

I was living in England so I was, when Mountbatten was killed. I remember I was out cleaning my windows and this wee woman came up to me and gave me hell.

'You Irish, look what you've done.' We were all tarred with one brush because we were Irish. I hadn't even heard the news. To be

honest I didn't even know who Lord Mountbatten was. It was only when I rang home that Mummy told me and she didn't even know he was related to the Queen. It was only later I found out he was the Queen's cousin. But my neighbour woman Lily wouldn't say hello after that. It would be alright for a week or two then it would start up again 'You Irish this, You Irish that.' It got to the stage where I didn't want to see her coming and if I turned on the news and another soldier had been killed I knew there'd be hell to pay. Lily wouldn't let it go. But back home my family weren't affected much. By that stage everyone took it as a way of life and no one passed any remarks. Mountbatten's death was seen as just another person killed in the Troubles. It didn't affect my family directly. It didn't stop us coming to Sligo.

I've always thought of Sligo as a peaceful place from when I was a child. The way we were brought up as Protestants, when it was the 12th of July we were taken over the border. There was a Catholic man used to lend Daddy his car so we could go south to Bundoran. That's where our days were spent during the 12th of July demonstrations. When I was small I didn't know the difference between a Catholic and a Protestant. I remember a boy called Sean who had a different school uniform. When I asked my mother why that was she said, 'because he's smarter than you.' That was her way of making sure I wouldn't treat Catholics any different. That attitude was quite common in my family. It's all mixed marriages. I never paid any attention to differences between Catholics and Protestants when I was growing up.

When my father got married he went to see a councillor about getting a house for us. The house was given to a Catholic family. After that the Orange sash was thrown off and never worn again. It wasn't because the family was Catholic, just because the politician was no help whatsoever. I believe politicians should help the people who voted for them, whether they are Catholic or Protestant.

The Troubles started to have an impact in my life about 1985 when my husband and his workmates were under threat. My husband was a builder but he wasn't involved in any organisations so he thought he was safe. Then when he started building work at an army barracks he was told his life was at risk. He had to look under his car every morning. We were all made aware of the need for more security. He would leave home at different times, go to work on Monday and maybe not get back until Friday afternoon. Security checks became

part of our everyday lives. Two of my friends were killed along the border in Castlederg. One was a UDR man. I knew those friends as very quiet and innocent, just doing a job. I couldn't understand why they were blown to bits. That was really hard for me to deal with. I think that was in the early 80s. The one event that changed my life forever happened on Friday 17th January 1992.

My husband wasn't supposed to be working that day. He was quite ill but he insisted on going to work. The contractor wasn't very high profile so he thought he was safe. He worked a lot at Christmas time and we used to go to my sister's place. Then Jimmy was able to take two weeks off and we thought we'd be able to have Christmas in our home every year after that. A fortnight later he was gone.

There had been a threat at the base all week. I normally went to my mother's then picked him up later. Apparently the bomb was supposed to go off in the morning but because it was foggy it was changed to the afternoon. If it had gone off when it was supposed to my Jimmy would be still alive.

I remember at 5.10pm I went out to get potatoes. I remember crossing the road and hearing the awful bang. My first thought was 'My God, they've got our men.' That was strange because it was fifteen miles down the road but I just knew because something gave me this cold feeling. My neighbour said, 'you're talking nonsense.' Nobody could understand what happened. Then at 6 o'clock it was on the news. My daughter was sick all over the kitchen floor. Nobody could give me any information. I even rang the hospitals. All the neighbours were out. There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing. The authorities knew at 7oclock that my Jimmy was gone but I wasn't officially told until 10 o'clock.

It's nearly 20 years ago but that day is as vivid in my memory as yesterday. I remember exactly what I was doing. I was wallpapering. I remember thinking, 'he'll come home and see those bubbles and say it's not right.' It was a cloudy day, foggy and mild for January. That day doesn't seem to fade. Once I talk about it, I'm right back there.

The IRA has destroyed my life. I have had to learn to live with it. I'll never forget it. I'll never forgive them. I've come to the conclusion I don't know who to forgive. If they'd been brought to justice I know, with the Agreement, they wouldn't stay in prison, probably, for more than a few months. But it would be good to name and shame them. If they came to me face to face and said, 'we murdered your husband'

I would find it difficult but I think I could forgive them, if they were genuine. But still, to this day, I feel I can't forgive them.

I would say for about three years afterwards I would have been a bigot. I don't know why that was. My mother used to scold me for it. It probably wasn't until I got help from the WAVE Trauma Centre that it just turned right around. I learned that there were so many Catholics out there that had suffered as much as I did. I know a Catholic girl who was killed by the UVF just about 500 yards up the road from Teebane. Me and her mother, to this day would still have a big rapport.

Organisations that have come into being since the Troubles began have brought people together to tell their stories. I think it's good for all organisations to have a mix from both sides because you can sit and listen and realise they've gone through exactly the same kind of thing; they've suffered just as much. When my husband was murdered, that was the worst thing for me; that had the most impact, definitely. It was such a struggle afterwards. Just to get my girls to eighteen, I prayed to God to give me the strength to see them through. It was difficult, especially with the youngest girl. I couldn't cry in front of her. If I wanted to cry I would have to go to the toilet and then I'd only be sitting there for a few minutes and she'd bang on the door. I just couldn't leave her. She had this fear that I would go out and never come back, like her Dad.

I think all that fear has impacted on the next generation. I never told my granddaughter how her granddad was killed. She knows it was a bomb. I didn't want her to know if it was Catholic or Protestant bombers. I will wait till she asks in later life. I don't want her growing up hating Catholics. My daughter is grown up, she's going to college. People have said to me 'why are you sending her there? After all she lost her father.' I didn't send her, she chose to go there. I don't think people should go here or go there, to college or anywhere, just because it's Protestant, especially since the Ceasefire. We've moved on. I don't want my grandchildren growing up making distinctions. I hope that in the next thirty years, Northern Ireland will be a different place, a peaceful place where people can go where they want, say what they want. It feels so different now, you can go to work without being stopped, you can go to visit friends and there's no roadside check. That's all gone, which is brilliant.

I think when the army was here Catholic families suffered more than Protestant families. I've heard so many stories now, from my

work on peace projects. Stories about how the army treated people, taking them out of their cars, taking their groceries out, potatoes and the like, throwing them across the road, then maybe holding people for an hour or more. If they didn't cooperate it would be even worse. If that happened nowadays it would be harassment but I think because so much of it went on, it's hard for people to trust the police. I would like to think that the PSNI could gain the respect of everyone as a new police force but I would say it is only in certain areas. Around Belfast or Armagh or other parts of Northern Ireland I'd say there would still be a lot of distrust but around Omagh I'd say people would have no problem trusting the police.

I'd say it's part of the legacy of the conflict that Catholic families feel more distrust of the police probably because they were stopped and searched so much and made to wait on the side of the road. That never happened to me or anyone in my family. Once the police see your driving license they know what area you live in.

When the Omagh bomb went off in '98 it took me back to my own atrocity. I know so many people Catholic and Protestant that were killed or injured. I thought I should go to the funerals but I couldn't cope. People started asking me how I had coped but I couldn't tell them. I wanted to say, it's early days, it will be a long hard struggle but I couldn't find the words. It's been a hard struggle for all the families affected by it. I think a lot of families have moved on, a few can't or won't. The younger generation is different, they all mix together. I think that's brilliant. We have a lot of Polish people living here now and Lithuanians. We're more diverse. We're moving forward. I'm so glad that the Peace money allows organisations to exist that bring people together from both sides because it shows that both sides have been affected, both have moved on and there's light at the end of the tunnel. There's still a lot of people out there who maybe wouldn't have come to terms with the Troubles, with what happened to them personally. They haven't even started to talk about it. I'd say we'd need another ten years or so. Then you'll have the transgenerational effects, how it gets passed on to children and grandchildren.

If someone had said to me twenty years ago that I'd be working in Catholic areas or Loyalist areas I'd have said, 'no, never, not me.' But that has changed. I still feel a bit afraid going into new areas for the first time but once you meet the families the fear just goes. I have to say I have been accepted well by both sides of the community,

both extremes. I suppose Northern Ireland being such a small place, when I say my name, people make a connection. They connect me with Teebane; they know straight away that I'm Protestant. Now I feel it's a privilege to be allowed into people's homes. I can say 'Yes, I'm Protestant' or 'Yes, I'm connected to Teebane but I'm not here to talk about me, I'm here to listen to your story.' That's my Outreach work. I think there should be more of this kind of thing done on both sides of the border, people telling their stories and hearing each other. I think it can be a turning point for people and give them great satisfaction to tell their story. Years ago I would have sat and cried and sometimes I still get a wee bit emotional but there's no shame in that.

When that young Catholic PSNI officer was killed a few weeks ago, that was horrendous. It made my stomach churn when I heard it. My daughter rang me. It was just a horrible feeling all weekend. The fist announcement was that a Catholic policeman's car had been bombed. Then later they said he was dead. I thought of his mother, how awful it was for her. I could feel some of her pain. She lost a son, I lost a husband. It must be horrendous for a mother to lose a child. There's no words to describe it. I feel for that mother. I'd agree with everything she said, that his death should not be in vain. I hope people will say now, 'Enough is enough.' I think a lot more people should tell their stories because it's kind of like a release and it shows there's good and bad on both sides and we all have to work and live together now.

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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