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.

“Crossing the line”

Photograph: Derek Speirs

Crossing the line

I moved back to the North in the 1980's. There was a lot of shootings and bombings going on then in Northern Ireland. It affected the Travellers in the way that there was restrictions in place where they could or couldn't go. Knocking on people's doors, selling stuff, going to the markets and setting up a stall, well that wasn't really a healthy occupation, so it was best not do that type of work. Most of the lads up there were either on the scrap or the blocks of timber, you know, it was a better occupation, it was open, and people could see exactly what you are doing.

I moved into a site in Derry. I had no dealings in any way shape or form with the IRA. The experience I had was of the police and the army, driving in and out of the site at night, shining and flashing the lights, beeping the horns and putting on the sirens and stuff. The area we were in was full of Catholics, Nationalists, and they weren't really keen on the army or the police wandering around and driving around on a regular basis. It could be maybe every second night, you know? With all the stuff that was going on in the North, the police and the army weren't the type of people that you wanted around your place in the early hours of the morning in case somebody decided to take potshots at them.

We just couldn't afford to be seen to be getting involved in any side one way or the other. To be involved, or to be seen to be involved with the police coming and doing random checks in around the camps at night, or driving in during the day, wasn't healthy for the people who were staying there. So the best thing for it was to try and cause as much aggravation as possible to the police and then they would stop coming in. Which worked eventually.

We decided that the best way to sort it out was to get planks, put nails in them and leave them along the gate where we'd go in and out and when they would be driving in they would cut the tyres off their jeeps. Now the army and police were upset about it, obviously, they weren't happy, they were giving out, and they dragged a few of the lads out. They wanted to know exactly who had done it, and why, so we said we didn't know, that there was no planks when we were going to bed so it could have been anybody that came around and put them in there.

Otherwise you would be locked up for the whole day, I mean, you'd be straight into the back of those Land Rovers and trounced. We stuck to our story, I mean, they knew we'd done it, they probably even knew why we'd done it, but we stuck to the story that we didn't know who had done it and it could be anybody, so they sort of half accepted it after a couple of hours. Then they decided to raid and tear around and see what they could find and check the motors out and the usual hassle and aggravation, but then they went off and they didn't come back after that for a long time. It had started to become a habit with them to come in but that stopped them coming.

I remember another night when I was staying at a different site and we were in a pub in town. It was built into the walls of Derry. I got into a taxi to get to where I was staying, and when I told the guy in the taxi where I was living he wasn't really keen about bringing me home, but he said he would on condition that when we got to the roundabout he would slow down and we would all jump out, but that he couldn't stop there. And you know that was the reality: he said, 'if I do stop and we are caught I would be shot and you would be shot too'. They even had their own taxi service, the Protestants was on one side and the Catholics was on the other side.

We used to have a great laugh, because, when I moved across the border, I was in Clones, which is right on the border and of course at that time, Travellers being Travellers, you wouldn't be served – it's the same today, this is 2011 and you still won't be served in some pubs. At that time we used to go across the border into Newtownbutler to the pub, and we had to go through an army checkpoint. Every Saturday night we would go out, go across the border, and we would meet the army. They would stop us and they would say 'are you going to the pub lads' and we would say 'yeah', and on the way back the driver would have a few bottles on him, and he'd wind down the window

and hop a sixpack out the window to the soldier and they would let you go across the border with no hassle. I know it was illegal but we used to do it on a regular basis. Now you wouldn't do it if the police was there, because you'd be thrown in the back of a jeep and away with you. The police and the army were different. But the army guys didn't mind, or they didn't seem to mind anyway, if you gave them six bottles of beer.

I remember once we were stopped at the checkpoint and I was asked where I was coming from and I said, 'Derry' and the guy said he had never heard tell of it. The policeman and the soldiers, they were calling it Londonderry. And they kept me there for about an hour because I wouldn't say I was living in Londonderry. I kept saying I was in Derry and the more I said I was in Derry the more they held on to me. Until eventually they got fed up and let me go. I wasn't too bothered, it was a nice sunny day and I had nowhere much to go.

Aughnacloy. Now that was a dangerous border. I remember going across that border one evening and there was a couple of young cadets, you wouldn't describe them as more than cadets, these guys were only about 17 or 18 years of age if they were that.

Now when you come into those checkpoints obviously you had to dim your lights, they were sort of very pernickety about that – if you didn't they would be very upset with you. There would be fellas jumping up in the air with guns and they would be waving them at you – so you wouldn't be long turning off your lights completely, never mind to dim them.

But I seen them once, and I seen a young man, a young coloured fella, a black fella, and he was terrified. His face: he was absolutely terrified. He had the gun resting on one of those boulders, and he was lying across it and there was another young fella, and his knuckles were white, he was holding the gun so tight. So if you had a car that was backfiring and you going across that border, well God may mind you, because these young lads, when they stopped you at Aughnacloy they would tear your motor from bumper to bumper. There was no exception. Traveller or settled, they didn't care. I think it was the only border in the North where they took their job extremely seriously, and if the police were there you could multiply it by five. That was Aughnacloy! The young fellas that were there with their guns, they would break your nerves looking at them.

But the other borders – now some of them it was just a wave through or they would stop and ask you for ID, you would show them your ID and then you were gone.

The children were terrified at the beginning when they seen the guns but near the end they were sort of fine with it. After a while they didn't seem to mind the soldiers much. They got used to them because every time, on the streets, they would see them back-to-back walking up and down the streets with their guns. So they seen them on a regular basis and it became sort of semi-acceptable to see you being stopped at checkpoints and not getting that much of a hassle other than just show the ID and they would wave you through.

The families that were living up there, they got about their business I suppose the same as everybody else. The people that grew up in the North, whether settled or Traveller, I suppose they knew the boundaries. When, of course, the likes of me came in there was fresh meat that knew nothing about it and they would tell me all kinds of stories! They would tell me everything was acceptable but it wasn't of course. You had to have your ID on you at all times in the North, it wasn't acceptable not to have it otherwise you would end up in the Police station. That was something that I didn't realise because when I was in England you didn't have to have your ID and here in Ireland you didn't have to have your ID constantly in your pocket either at the time. In the North, if you hadn't it in your motor or in your pocket at all times you were begging for trouble. Every 500 yards in some places there was a different checkpoint, whether it was army or police, and then there was the random ones where there were fellas that were out walking and they were bored walking so they would stop somebody, just to give themselves a rest from walking. There was a lot of that sort of stuff.

There were a few fellas in Derry that used to get a lot of aggravation, but then, truthfully, they used to aggravate the army and police too. One fella went out to Buncrana and he got a load of timber – he had a brand-new van and he was taking it to Fort George, When they brought him in they stripped the van, took all the timber out, took off the car trailer that he had and emptied all that to the ground. They took all the timber off of the inside of the van, they took all the timber off the roof and the floor where the van was timbered out. They took everything out, held him for about six hours checking him out and then when they were finished they told him to get his van and move

out of the way. He wanted them to fix the timber back on again. And they said, 'if you want it, take it, and if you don't, leave it and we will burn it'.

There was things like that went on, and it happened with scrap as well. If you gave aggravation to them you were begging for bother. There was times when some fellas were just coming across the border and they would aggravate the soldiers, or they would say that there was a van behind them with explosives in it or something like that, just for a bit of fun, because you see, these guys were reared in the North and they were used to seeing soldiers and police with guns, so it didn't bother them in the slightest. They thought it was funny, for some strange reason. They had a weird sense of humour. But after a while when the soldiers and the police starts aggravating them, holding them for the whole day, taking their motors apart, they decided it wasn't really a good idea after all. But like I said, the guys up there were born and reared into it all, they were used to it. But for me, with seeing the guns, if the fella asked me for my ID, I said, 'there you are'. I mean, I am not a saint and I wasn't really happy, but I knew where to draw the line, I never mentioned explosives in anyway shape or form because I knew that was crossing the line.

I suppose my view on it would be that it had to be hard for the people that were living there, even though they were born and reared watching this all their lives. You can see why all the resentment towards the army and the police were there, you know, for some of the Catholic areas, because they used to get riddled just for being Catholic. In the North, and even today, your name got you a hard time, because they could tell by your name whether you were Catholic or Protestant and depending on who you were talking to at any given time it would mean that you would have a good time or a bad time. With Travellers, they had it fairly easy because when they heard the name they knew they were Travellers anyway so it didn't really bother them that much. We were different in that way. But I suppose, for settled people in the North, they had a hard time even getting their kids to school at times, because of what street you could walk down and that. So when they go to one of the other countries, England, America or anywhere else I would imagine that they would have a completely different outlook on life because of the experiences that they had growing up.

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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