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.


“Looking for directions”

Looking for directions

I was born here in the South. I was in England for years but there were family members back in the North, so I went back there. It was a nice place. I found them all to be easy-going and friendly people, doing their own thing. I was in a few places there: Belfast, Derry, Armagh, Strabane.

For the Traveller families that were born and reared in the North, they had a completely different view on things from what I did. Because they had grown up seeing everything that was going on they knew where to go, who to talk to, what was acceptable and what wasn't, you know, how their behaviours should be. So for me it was all new. It was all sort of a novelty in the beginning.

Back in England in the 80's all you had was reports on the television and the radio of the shootings, the bombings, the killings and all the rest of it. And it sort of painted a complete and utter different picture from what was actually going on. When I arrived in Belfast, I was sort of a bit anxious on my first couple of days, because I didn't know what to expect, but after a while it was no different than anywhere else. Okay, there was a bit of added extra hassle in that there was bombings and shootings going on, but they weren't a Dáily occurrence. They weren't on every street corner which was the impression they gave you on the news. And it wasn't everybody that was running around on the street with guns in their hands or wearing balaclavas with bombs in their back pockets.

But that was the impression that people got, you know, even people that was South of the border, they were terrified to go across the border in case they would be shot. Personally speaking, I found it to be a beautiful place and very nice people. The families that were in it, they were comfortable. They had grown up there and they

knew where you could and couldn't go. Looking back now, I had the innocence, if you want, of driving from one street to another not realising what was what.

I remember going from Derry to Belfast one day to get a part for a generator. I had to go to Donegall Square and so I went up along the motorway and into Belfast and heading for Donegall Square I took a wrong turning. I didn't realise it to be honest, I was chatting away, myself and my father-in-law was in the front of the car, and we were just driving along and then we decided that we were not going in the right direction. So there's two fellas coming up the street and my father-in-law said, 'pull in and we'll have a chat with them two fellas and we'll ask them where Donegall Square is'. And thankfully I was going fast, too fast to stop easily.

Now, I say thankfully because I had passed those two guys out and just about 50 yards further on there was a woman coming out of a shop, so I slowly pulled up beside her and I rolled down the window and we asked her how to get to where we wanted to go. She went into a panic as soon as I spoke and said, 'oh my God do you realise where you are?' And I said, 'yes', and I thought 'well, I'm in Belfast', and then I said, 'well, we're looking for Donegall Square and we got to take a wrong turn'. She said, 'look, don't stop, go to the lights, turn right and keep going until you see your own colours, but do not stop for anybody, do not ask questions of anybody. Please don't stop, and please get going right now, go'.

That was when the reality sunk in that we were in dangerous waters and for a few moments it was a bit scary. We went to the lights, hung a right, drove down there, seen green white and gold on the kerbs and all them things, and then we sort of laughed about it. That poor woman heard a southern accent in the middle of Belfast, and I can't remember the area that I was in, but there was an awful lot of red white and blue around me. I laughed with my father-in-law at the time, and I said, 'if we had have stopped and chatted to those two fellas, they would have dragged you off and I would have had to drive off and leave you there!' But there was a serious element to it. Thankfully I was going too fast to stop and chat to those two fellas, and thank God that I met the woman that I met.

Now even today I have often thought about that reality, and what would've happened if I'd asked those two guys instead of the woman. Would they have been as accommodating? Now, to be truthful, I don't

know – well maybe they would say, go to the lights and turn right, or maybe they would have said go to the lights and turn left and I'll show you a shortcut, do you know? I don't know, but it was a sort of eye-opener, to realise that all wasn't well in the world, that even through my tinted rose coloured glasses view of Northern Ireland, there was actual danger in it and there was other things going on that we knew nothing about. That it wasn't as safe as I thought it was.

But that didn't change my view and I still stayed in the North. But I often thought about it afterwards, how things could have turned out, or would have turned out had I stopped and had a chat with those two fellas.

British army, of the soldiers. We were always going over and back and I didn't have any fear. I suppose because we had people in the RUC, my cousins' husband and my wife's cousin as well, that if we were picked up, we would have someone to use as a reference. And my wife on the other hand would always have been a little bit less comfortable in the North then I would have been. She was fearful of the soldiers and the army and the RUC.

People did talk to us about incidents in the North, not a lot, but they would a bit, when atrocities would happen. If we take the time of Bloody Sunday, the man that was working with me at that time, he took the Nationalist side as it were in that and was a bit hostile towards me for a little while. It wore off and we remained good friends afterwards and it's understandable, you know. But people's attitudes towards us as a community never changed.

I suppose everything is advancing in some way or another all the time and trying to look back at the past is negative. You have to move with the way things are evolving. There are far more important and difficult things than your religion and the politics of the country. Economic survival is far more important than any of those things I think. I've seen down through the years so many people showing a degree of bitterness and resentment and they have never sought or made many advances of their own. It eats away at you. Life is short and I would think the best approach is to try not to create unhappiness for yourself.

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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