

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 was all over
in five minutes”



It was all over in five minutes

When I was about 10 years of age, I went to stay with my cousins in Omagh for the weekend.

The first time I seen soldiers was when I got to the border. Like, you wouldn't see them in Sligo – you would only see them on Saint Patrick's Day marching in the Sligo parade. In the early 70s there was no barracks in Sligo town apart from the FCA who were trained on a Sunday, so to actually see soldiers with guns was a new thing to me. I was looking out for the border because I knew I was going to come across these soldiers with the big guns, you know, it was like a film. The bus driver said, 'we're coming up to the border now, sit down and keep your seat. Don't say anything and don't be shouting out anything'. I remember peering out the window at the soldiers. It was all new. It was my first time ever to stay overnight in Omagh, and it was all excitement. I was thrilled that I was going to be there Friday night and Saturday night, and all these soldiers going around with their face blackened and big armoured cars and guns hanging out of them.

The woman of the house was a first cousin of my mother. Her husband worked in, I think it was a brewery, or just a place where they used to bottle drink or minerals or something like that, I can't remember now. He was just an ordinary man that came home, had a wash, went out for his pint, and minded his own business. An ordinary family.

On my first night, Friday night, I was put into a single bed with my cousin John at about 10 o'clock, and we were soon fast asleep. I woke up at about a quarter past eleven, I heard a lot of banging and noise in the street and the noises seemed to be getting nearer and nearer.

It was one of those old terraced streets like you see in Coronation Street with no front gardens, just a long street with all small houses.

I sat up in the bed and the next thing I heard an unmerciful bang, and the front door flew into the hall and I heard all these big heavy feet coming up the stairs and the first bedroom door was kicked in, and then our bedroom door was kicked in, and there was soldiers standing in the room. They ran towards our bed, tossed the bed up in the air leaving us on the floor and the bed on top of us, did the same in the other rooms, and threw the furniture around the place. They never said a word and were back down the stairs in 30 seconds and out the door. The whole street of about 20 houses was done in five minutes, just like that. All the doors broken in, all the beds tossed, and all the furniture thrown around. We were left with a street of screaming roaring kids, adults roaring obscenities and the noise of the trucks pulling away off around the corner. It was all over in five minutes and the people that did it were gone into the darkness as if they weren't there.

That would have been the summer of 1971. It was a one off and it is a story for me to tell but it's a vivid memory I have of being up the North at ten years of age.

This was the first time I encountered anything like that. I was a bit shaken, giddy – I couldn't sleep a wink that night. I wasn't hurt, I was all excited! I thought it was great! But there was a lot of kids younger than me crying their eyes out, toddlers, very angry people, old women all crying.

It was just Bam Bam Bam Bam. The truck pulled down the street nice and slow to keep up with all that was going on. There could have been I suppose 12 or 14 soldiers – there would be three or four in each house, and there would be two or three houses being done at the one time. They would be two or three of them out in the road standing with guns looking up and down the street, the rest were kicking in doors and throwing furniture around the place, and then they just all jumped in the back of the truck, down the street, round the corner and gone. And there was absolutely no sense to it. There was no logic – why was it done? Why that street?

It didn't affect me there and then, but looking back on it, seeing all the crying children and all the upset people, it sure affected the people that had had it done to them on numerous occasions before. The amazing thing was that at twelve o'clock at night or half twelve,

a fleet of carpenters arrived and the doors were fixed before we went back to bed. So how regularly did it happen? I know my cousin of the same age as me was very annoyed and the whole family was very annoyed, and the whole street was very annoyed.

Then they got up the next morning and they said they didn't want to talk about it. I was kind of hopping around like the little pup – 'do you remember he came in, do you remember he came in, the way he threw the bed up, the big fella came in', and they're saying, 'yeah yeah yeah, don't be annoying us about it, it's all right for you, you can go back home but we're left with this you know. Could be again, could be tonight, could be a months time'. They were on tenterhooks all the time. It was a terror to them. The novelty of it was well gone I suppose, and then I suppose they developed hatred, complete hatred for them, because they were faceless – there wasn't even a voice, there was nothing, there was just blackened face, helmet, big gun, big boots, big uniform – two kids, bed up in the air with kids in it, jumped in a lorry and drove away. That was it.

It affected my thinking afterwards because if I heard people try to justify that the British Army were there to protect all communities I would think 'well they didn't protect this community, they just went in there and intimidated and scared kids and upset everybody'.

That was my one and only encounter of violence or intimidation by the British Army in the North. I told my mother the next day on the phone about what had happened and she promptly got me on a bus back to Sligo. I was sent home on the 12 o'clock bus on Saturday morning. I was rushed back to safety. So that was my one night as a kid in Northern Ireland. Needless to say I wasn't allowed to stay in Omagh again.

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 than 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