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.


“Any chance of a salmon?”

Any chance of a salmon?

I couldn't tell you what age I was for sure when I found out my dad was in the IRA but I remember he used to go away off at night times and I would ask him 'daddy where are you going' and stuff like that, and he would say, 'son, I'm going off fishing', but then he mightn't come back for three or four days. Then I remember, I came home from school one day, myself and my sister, and our house was closed so I went over to my neighbour across the road, she would mind us, and she said, 'your dad was taken away'. I said, 'what do you mean?' She said, 'well, you know, your dad was taken away', and I was pretty dumb, thinking like 'what's going on here?' She explained to me that the army came and got him, and I was like, 'what?' And I kind of – I put two and two together – and I realised what it was. It came out then in the local papers, you know, 'IRA escapee has been arrested in this house' and that was when the penny dropped. When I was younger, I kind of had suspicions of something, he's not going out fishing for three or four days and coming back with no fish, you know!

Even though I was young I knew about Sinn Féin, but I don't think I was old enough at the time to understand the IRA or that there was any connection. I knew there was something, but it was when that incident happened that the penny dropped. I was in primary school, so I suppose I was about ten. I was actually in the house that morning and I heard a commotion downstairs and dad saying, 'I'm telling you one thing, don't wake up my children' so when I got up in the morning there was just mum there. But there were other times when I got up in the morning and dad wasn't there anyway so I thought it was a normal day. Mum made your breakfast, you went off to school, she dressed you and whatever and that was that. I only realised this was different when I came home and the neighbour said, 'your dad was taken away'.

But for some reason at the same time, I didn't think anything bad had happened, but then you heard people saying the army had taken him away and I was thinking, 'am I ever going to see him again?'. When you hear that the army has taken your dad away, you think that they might go and shoot him or something, when you're ten years of age you don't understand, you know.

I was in school the day of dad's arrest. The story would have been on the radio and one of the teachers did say it to me. She was nice about it, but then there were other teachers who would, they wouldn't single you out, but they cut you down, they cut you off. I could tell at that age anyway that the teachers were keeping their distance from me, they would teach you alright but that was it. They did their job but I knew they were keeping their distance.

The kids in school knew. There were kids who wouldn't talk to me because their parents would have told them that they knew who my dad was. I'm not saying that it was always people with money or anything like that but the richer kids, they wouldn't let you play games with them and stuff like that. Then there were kids as well who would know and say to me, 'I heard about your dad' and this that and the other. I would have said, 'heard about what?', trying to put it lightly, because they didn't know what to say.

I think the parents of the other children in school told them not to play with me. In this primary school; after school, somebody would go to somebody else's house for dinner. That would be the kind of wee thing that was done. Except that I never got asked around to other people's houses. And so I would be thinking, 'there's something not right here'. I asked my mother one time why this was, 'why won't the others ask me around?' and she told me. This was after it all happened with dad. I knew in my heart why before then but the kids didn't say. In later years, I was old enough to talk with them about it and they told me it was because they would have heard, 'it's Dermot's son and he is a terrorist and he is a bomber' or something. They just thought, 'he's in the IRA, it's bad news, so I'm keeping my children away from this or that'. So I wasn't allowed around to their houses.

I'm just remembering this now, but before my dad got arrested, he didn't tell me exactly what he was involved in but he explained it as something and he said, 'look, don't worry about it'. So I knew that if the kids in school were doing things like that, I kind of knew that my dad had said not to worry. To be honest, I can't remember what it was

that he said, but in my heart I knew why the ones in school were like that, even though I didn't know exactly what was going on.

My dad didn't say, 'you don't tell that', or 'if anyone talks to you, you don't say this', because I didn't know anything about my dad or what he was involved in, but in some way as a child, I was picking up little things because dad was going, or if he would come over with a couple of people, or had loads of people in the house on a certain night. So, as a kid maybe I was just putting two and two together and kind of defended him.

My mum told me everything after dad got arrested and she had to. I knew in myself though because as I mentioned, when dad said something to me when I was younger he must have said it in a way that I was able to understand. Because when he was arrested even though I had it in my head that I would probably never see him again, I remembered he had said, 'never to worry or anything like that, I'll be fine.' I was so young that I can't bring it back to mind what he said, but when he was arrested, I think maybe I was waiting for the day.

All along, I'd have asked my mother; 'is he gonna come back, where are they going to put him?' But she always said, 'don't worry, everything will be fine', stuff like that, the usual mother thing to do. The main question I had was, 'is he going to come back?' I didn't know if he was going to come back at all you know. He'd go and then he'd come back and then he would go and then he would be gone, and I'd be thinking, 'what's going on here like?' I'd only ask about where is he and stuff like that. It was very hard for my mother I'm sure. It was very hard for her having to live that lifestyle, it's not the normal happy family – towards the extreme opposite you know.

People would have asked me about what happened with my dad; 'what did he do?', 'why was he in prison?', 'how did he escape?', 'how did they do it?', 'how is he still out for so long?', 'how is he free now?' and stuff like that. I would answer them, but I wouldn't go into the details. I would tell them the truth. They had probably read stuff in the papers but I would tell them the truth. Whether they would believe me or not I don't know. To be honest, it was the same question off everybody and I got sick of it. 'How did he do it Kieran', and I didn't want to be mean, I would just say 'I don't know', but it was the same thing every time like, so I just told a shortened version of it. But then on the other hand, there was, 'fair play to your dad.'

The teachers in secondary school would have asked me at school. As I was pretty handy at the football, I got on well with a lot of the teachers. They would ask me why he was put in prison. I just said I didn't know. They would especially ask me 'how did he escape?', 'how did he do it?', 'how was he living here for so long?'. I wouldn't say anything, I would just say, 'I never asked anything about it, I don't know.'

So, on one side you had the bad handling of it but there was a good side as well. You were respected. It kept me out of trouble when I was at school, because nobody would bully me or anything like that, I suppose that was a good factor, I never thought of it before. They would have been afraid of what was going to happen if they bullied me, not that it would, but they probably thought it you know.

It was good, it kept me out of badness. When I was a teenager, it kept me away from going out drinking or taking drugs or whatever which was a good thing. It was because of the IRA's attitude towards drugs; 'don't be having that fellow around with us, don't be having him around here, his father is in the IRA' or 'you don't want be going about with that fellow, something will happen, you will be shot' or something like that. I can remember things like that being said I went was in school. I have that image. I did feel left out, sure, when you go to teenage discos, when teenagers hang around youth clubs and stuff like that and you'd hear, 'don't be having that fellow around here', I definitely felt left out. Of course. My best friends were there but you always want to be part of the gang when you are a teenager. But, I just went with it because I accepted it and it was what it was you know.

My sister probably would have had the same kind of thing going on in her primary school. We went to two different primary schools, I went to an all boys school, she went to an all girls school, so I'm sure she would have had the same kind of thing as well you know. I don't think we ever talked about it, or said, 'I wonder where dad is?' or stuff like that. But we say things like that now. It's good, I suppose it brought myself and my sister closer. There was only the two of us.

We all had a protest for him, for me dad, not to extradite him, in O'Connell Street in Sligo. There were loads of us, standing there with a big sheet. It was weird at that age, me standing at the top of O'Connell Street at 11, 'Don't extradite Dermot M' – looking back at it, Jesus! I hadn't a clue what extradition was! It was crazy when I look back and think. There was photos and stuff in the papers and

you would have been going back into school. Of course the teachers would have been saying, 'I saw you in the paper.' I was old enough to know they knew exactly what was going on.

I would have been a bit young to go to the prison and I'd say mum thought I might get a wee bit freaked out seeing my dad in prison at ten years of age. It would have been intimidating. At the time I was trying to understand why he was there and stuff like that – 'sure, it's my daddy and he's done nothing wrong'. I was too young to actually fully understand what he did, or what was going on you know, but that was probably the hardest thing, the 'why is he there?' Every kid's going to think, 'what did my dad do wrong, he's only my dad like, and he's the best person in the world.'

He came out of prison and then he went back, and then he came out, and then he was back. My sister didn't know though, she hadn't a clue, she just thought he was going away on holiday. I can remember that actually, we stayed in a friend of the family's house and he was heading away and it was actually Nicola's first Holy Communion, and she was like, 'why isn't daddy coming?', and mum was trying to explain to her that daddy was off on holiday. Of course I knew, but obviously I couldn't tell my sister because she was too young to understand. God, she was upset.

All of the guards gave you such a hard time, they definitely, definitely did. Like, if I was walking home up to my street, they would drive by slowly and stop and wind down the window and say, 'where is your father?', 'how's your father keeping?', 'right young Kieran, how's things, how is your father keeping?'. Or if I was down town and I met the guards they would always ask questions like 'where is your father?' I wouldn't talk to them. I actually genuinely wouldn't talk to the guards. I would just keep walking by you know. I suppose you could say they did kind of give me a hard time. It happened any time I saw them. Definitely. And this went on for a wee while to be honest. They would always be up there, every single day they would drive up and park outside the house and sit there. You can't do anything about it, it's not annoying you technically, but I remember sitting looking out and they were parked outside the house, like an hour sometimes. At that age, the guards pulling you over and asking you questions. Kids pulled over at 12 years of age and Jesus – you were freaked out!

My dad's identity being out in the open probably made things harder. Dad had set me up for what was going to be ahead when I was

a teenager. When I was about 13, he told me everything. Everything. He basically just put me right. He knew what was going to be said to me, he prepared me, without me knowing he was preparing me. He prepared me for harassment by the guards, harassment by people who ask you questions and stuff like that. 'It's nothing to worry about, nothing to be ashamed about son, and stuff like that.' He would have advised me on what it was okay to talk about and what it wasn't okay to talk about. I think he knew that I knew anyway. He wouldn't blatantly tell me what he did straight out, but he talked about what was said in the papers, he explained it to me, what the truth was. They had put crazy stuff in the papers and that was really when it went haywire. As the years went on you learned stuff like that, he would try and explain it in a way that you would understand, I understood it anyway at a very young age.

Before the arrest, the guards wouldn't have come near the house because although they might have had suspicion they didn't know for sure who he was. I remember guards called to the house, and the same guard always used to call, I can't remember if dad was on the run or if they were looking for him, and there was a bench warrant out for my dad, and the guard used to call every day. We'd say, 'no he's not here', but dad would be up hiding in the wardrobe! He would call every day and he hadn't the right to come into the house or something like that. Dad let me know 'You will be grand, don't worry about it'. I knew the drill at this stage, I knew what to do. And he was like 'Jesus Christ son, you've a better chance of winning the lottery than getting your father in this house'. He still calls, even now, he still quizzes me, and would be smart like, 'how's your father keeping?', and, 'how's things and all that', in a smart way, not like in a formal way but cheeky like – 'ha ha ha how's your father keeping now?'

I would have to pass them on the way home from school. They wouldn't stop me every single day but any time they got a chance they would. There was one particular guard, who I knew because I used to play football a lot and he was involved in the football as well, so in a way, he was trying to get information out of me. He would always ask me questions at football, he would always refer back to, 'how's your father, where's your father?' and stuff like that. He would always try to fish information out of me but I suppose I always changed the subject. I knew what he was doing.

When the guards would call to the house, 'where is your dad?', 'he is gone out fishing', and then the guards would pull me over in the street and say, 'Kieran you must have a whole lot of fish in the freezer there' and then they would call to the door the next time and ask me, 'any chance of a salmon or a trout', and stuff like that. It's true to this day, if I meet them they will say it. They are grand about it though. I know the guard and if I was going through the town with my dad, dad would stop and have a chat with him. And he would stop and chat away. I suppose he was grand with me. He would stop and always try to ask information; I was in the football so it wasn't so bad, but the younger guards now, I would say if they had their way, they would have a rant. I don't know why it is, but they would like still ask, still to this day.

I remember them coming in and searching the house, I was in bed one time. The army came in, the emergency response unit came in and arrested him with their guns and all that. It wasn't just guards like, it was armed guards. There was the army guys, the big land rovers, they were outside the house, they were in the field out at the back, it was like nearly the army was in the street for him. I was asleep. They did it quietly. They knocked at the door, I didn't wake up, I don't know how I didn't wake up. My sister was in bed as well. We didn't wake up, it was crazy. I think if one or two Garda cars came, sure he would have just ran out the back door or something like that.

I asked him what it was like before he was even locked up, growing up and stuff like that. I know a bit about what it was like for him growing up because I lived down there for four or five months of the year and I saw what the Troubles were like. I would have been there seeing riots and police firing plastic bullets and stuff like that because I went down to visit my granny where he was from. It was right in the heart of stuff and it was crazy. So I understood that perspective but I asked him 'what it was like when they arrested you?', 'why did you get arrested?', 'what was it like in prison?'. He told me all about prison and it was crazy to learn all the stuff but good to know it all the same because you understood it. Because at that age when you are hearing so much about what's going on around you, you are thinking Jesus, what is my dad actually? So it was good when he explained, it was good to get the clarification.

It was weird when we were in history class when they were on about the break-out and stuff like that. I remember we were talking

about the hunger strike and yeah, I suppose it was weird in class, thinking, 'Jesus, they are on about my father here'. I never said anything, but they knew. You know when you know someone knows? The teacher did – the guy that was teaching history – he was a sound man. He was a young enough teacher too and he knew the score. He asked me one time about me dad and how was it growing up and stuff like that.

Dad was actually on the radio a couple of times when we were at school. It was lunchtime and you know when you are on your break, you would be sitting around and the radio would be on in the cafeteria, and there it was, me dad, talking about all this that and the other – it was weird. Everyone was grand about it, all the shouting and cheering, about a thousand students in our cafe, and it was turned up an' all. My friends used to work in the cafeteria shop, and everyone was like 'sssh quiet' and then they had it all turned up and everyone shouted, 'go on Dermot' – it was mad. I would have been proud, definitely, I wasn't going to go, 'oh Jesus Christ there's my dad' or this or that you know. I was proud – yes.

It was always – 'he's Dermot's son'. That's the way it was up to a couple of years until I was only about 18. I was Dermot's son. I was proud of him, I was proud of me father, you know I wasn't – 'I want to be known as Kieran'. When you are a teenager, a wee bit, you are kind of , 'I just want to be known as Kieran', but not in a bad way, it didn't affect me or anything you know.

I have my own views, I would be a Republican myself. I never had an interest in getting involved in politics, I really didn't. I remember dad used to watch the news the whole time, I used to crack up when I was a child. I thought 'what is he on?'! I used to wreck his head asking questions, I remember 'why is he asking that dad?', 'why is this dad?', and 'why is that?'. He was just like, 'will you sit down and watch it?'. I don't have a huge interest in politics to be honest with you. I just take it for what it is. My beliefs – that's a different thing – but I have no interest in politics. What I believe in is totally different – I'm a Republican.

I was down the North a lot, I was down while the Troubles were going on and I actually saw what was going on. And because I witnessed myself what was going on, of course you're not going to turn around and say 'this is wrong'. This is a way of life and that's how it goes and you accept it. It's not like you are brainwashed into it,

because you don't get that 'sit down talk' of 'this is how it is'. I always had my own choice, my dad said that to me all the time, 'I'm not going to tell you what to do' and still to this day when I'm voting and stuff, he won't tell me what to do.

(Referring to having moved to a new town)… the question is never brought up, but actually, there was a programme on not so long ago, a couple of months back, and it was about the break-out, and we were having some drinks. It was on the TV and see the names coming up, and it was like 'Dermot …', and a friend of mine was sitting there and he said, 'is he related to you?'. And I said, 'yeah man, he's my father', and he said, 'go to hell.' Then I told him about everything and it was crazy. I suppose yes, it's always coming up.

The guards where I live now I know I'm from Sligo. I don't know if I'm being paranoid, but if you catch a Guard's eye, he's going to look at you anyway and kind of stare at you, that's what they do, but with me being so used to it back home, I would think, 'why is he looking at me?' – weird you know!

My dad, in every way, he's very loyal to what he did, that came first to dad always and I knew that and I understood that. But he was always good to me, I don't know if I was to understand that he put them first, put that before us. But he gave his life to that, so I think I understood that, and that's how it was. I never thought what he was doing was wrong or anything like that. It didn't bother me.

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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