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.


“If I was born
on the other side”

If I was born on the other side

I was lucky to be brought up in Sligo, I think Sligo is a beautiful place, but if I came from Newtownabbey, or East Belfast, wouldn't I die for my flag, wouldn't I put the Union Jack around me when I see that these invaders from the South, whose population is increasing, are moving closer to us? Wouldn't I see it as the enemy banging on my door? Wouldn't I defend my parents and my brothers and sisters and my patch? I could be doing that if I was born on the other side.

It was them and us, you know? There was a huge them, because it was just the Catholic community that was the 'us', and then you had the Protestant community, with the soldiers, and the police force and that was 'them'. The Catholics in the North, my family, were probably nearly like the blacks in America or something, you know? The whole system was weighted against them.

And that's what I grew up with. If you're dealing with a police force that you see as your enemy, how do you report simple things like a burglary or a car crash – if you are calling your enemy? You knew these people were not on your side. So a line was drawn in the sand about who was on one side and who was on the other side.

When I was 17 I went to London. And I ended up sharing a room with a fella that was a good Protestant East Belfast man. He was the same age that I was, and we went out for months, and drank, and worked together and Northern Ireland wasn't mentioned, until one night he said to me, in a pub, we had only had two or three drinks, he said to me 'can I ask you a personal question?'. I said, 'go on'. He was a bit smaller than me and lighter than me and I would be well able to handle him, so he got a wee bit afraid then and he said, 'Ah I'm not going to ask you because you'll only get upset', and I said, 'ask me the question'. He didn't ask me the question for a while and

I actually thought that he was going to ask me was I a homosexual or something like that! So I nearly bullied it out of him then, I said, 'ask the question or I will break your jaw'. So he said, 'all right, all right, how long were you in London before you got used to wearing shoes?'

After that we had a chat He went to school in the 70s in Belfast and he said, 'we were told in school that people in the South had no tar on the road, no electricity, no phones, no shoes on their feet, that they all ate potatoes and they all burned turf, and that they did nothing else'. And that was his perception of the people of the South. He wanted to know how long I was in London before I got used to wearing shoes, because as far as he was concerned I never had a pair of shoes until I got to London!

That changed things for me because here was a person who was from the 'other side', who was 'the enemy', but it wasn't his fault, he was in a system where he was taught all these things, and now he was a young lad in a strange city the same as myself. We worked together, we had a drink together, and we had a laugh together. But he was educated in one part of the island and I was educated in the other part. Complete strangers we were, but sure, how would you go blaming him, if that's what he was brought up into? And I suppose he would say the same about me.

It opened my mind, being away from this island and working with all kinds of people. I worked in a factory with 240 men, there was only five of us white, the vast majority were Jamaicans, people who went over in the 1950's and had been there 20 years. They were lovely people. People that arrived from Jamaica that would have been in their 50's and 60's, and many of them looked after me. And I was very lucky that two foremen in the whole place were actually from Castlerea in Roscommon.

Once you are taken out of this island and away from North/South, Catholic/ Protestant, and you listen to other people's opinions and other people's perceptions about what is going on, then you realise things. You are looking back at Ireland from a distance, and you realise that it was ordinary people that you put down as 'a Loyalist Protestant'. They are just ordinary people that have to go to work,

pay the electricity bill and get sick and get on with life the same as you. Then you realise that it's what we were told and what we were fed – and that's on both sides of the border – that kept us apart. Of course as you get older and you realise that there was a reason for keeping us apart, because there were people making money out of it too. You mature and you grow up – it was crazy for 30 or 40 years slaughtering each other, for what? Pure madness.

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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