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.


“We only had the Provos”
O'Neills

We only had the Provos

I was a uniformed guard on border duty back in the 70s and 80s. I was a detective on the border as well so I had a long number of years service in total. Back in the 70s it was a very dangerous time there; shootings in the North, people going back down to the South after the shootings straight from the North. At times we were told not to go into the North. We weren't permitted because we were targets at one stage and there were certainly parts of the North we wouldn't go into – it wouldn't be safe. We were targeted by the PIRA. So if we were in the North we were legitimate targets – we were classed as security personnel.

We would have stopped people that had been doing a recce on an area coming back down again. We would have stopped people going North we believe might be doing something. When we stopped them they turned and went back, went away again. That would have happened on a regular basis. Some of them would be known to us personally, some wouldn't be from the area but they would be known to other members of the Gardaí, they would be PIRA people.

We would talk to them, sometimes we arrested them, and sometimes we wouldn't have reason to arrest them. In those times people were arrested on a very regular basis, Section 30 of the Offences Against the State Act says that all you had to have was a suspicion, and suspicion is a very, very wide word. You could arrest anybody on suspicion – it's still there actually – but it's not used now like it used to be, but it was used very commonly back in the 70s and early 80s at the border.

We were not really in huge danger say at a checkpoint, we weren't targets down here. They said we were legitimate targets once we were in the North but we weren't a target down here. Now in saying that I know members that were confronted in toilets in hotels and things like that – assaulted in toilets. I know a Garda whose car was later burned out following a confrontation he had with a PIRA member. They were different times, way different to nowadays.

You would have a sense of anxiety in certain areas, if you were on your own in an isolated area along the border, you would – but in the main – where we had our checkpoints on the main roads there'd be no sense of fear because we weren't targets there. But certainly if you were up in a quiet isolated area, you wouldn't know who would come along there at night-time. It would be confrontational I'm sure if someone came along and tried to get away if we hadn't many people on the ground. If you were in an isolated area, you could have eight, nine or ten border crossings. Some of those would only be dirt tracks, but you could walk back and over, you could drive back and over, you could go back and over on a motorbike. You might not be able to get back and over in a car. They were used both by the PIRA and smugglers and it wouldn't be a nice spot to be late at night on your own, or when I say on your own, with two uniformed Gardaí in the patrol car. There would be areas and times when of course you wouldn't feel comfortable.

I recall an incident that happened, it was a shooting in the North, it wasn't reported to us at the time and our marked Garda patrol car was out in an area only a few miles away and a car came along. There was a major confrontation, we had three people in our car and one was badly assaulted. The three got away and we had a good idea who they were – they weren't from the locality – but we knew one of them at the time. He was an active service IRA man from the south of Ireland who was attached to an active service unit along the border at the time. He was arrested afterwards but we had no evidence on him and because it was dark – we couldn't identify him.

If you had a special operation on, you would always be accompanied by the army, other times you'd be accompanied by armed detectives as well but a lot of times along the border they wouldn't be available to you. It would only be selected areas and selected times. Now in saying that, at some of the permanent checkpoints there would be army personnel on a permanent basis, they would be tucked in there with sandbags.

The IRA never took on the army, if the army were with us anywhere, they never took us on. If you look even in this day and age, the dissident element is here and if we have an army escort, for example with the big cash escort around the country, they are never touched. I can never remember anywhere on the border the army being taken on at the checkpoints, or shooting at them. So if you had the army with you, you were quite safe.

I never felt that uniformed members should be armed and I still feel that they shouldn't be. I would say if you asked the younger members nowadays, they would probably say in the main that they should be armed. But once we're not armed, we are not targets. If we were armed, we would be shot on sight. We have had some unarmed or uniformed members shot. But if we were armed I think we would have had a lot more uniformed members shot.

I think being armed would have changed the nature of the situation back in the time of the Troubles, I would say that we would have been targets if we were stopping people either coming back or on the way up doing something. I don't know if Gardaí on the border had a different perspective on this than Gardaí down the country because the IRA training units were down the country anyway. Most of them trained away from the border. There would be active units away from the border doing bank robberies and hold-ups and all that. They (Gardaí down the country) would be in danger if they were armed as well. I would like to qualify that – I was armed for about 12 years as a detective so I am well aware of what it is to be armed and what it is to be unarmed – and I firmly believe that we were far better off in uniform not armed and I still believe so.

After the Shannon's Cross incident (referring to an incident in Co. Roscommon in 1980 in which 2 members of the Gardaí were killed in a bank raid) there was uproar in the country at the time. There was outrage.

I would say that the PIRA at that stage knew they had got it wrong. It's different now to those times – those times they would have had support around the country – in every pocket of the country. But they need to have the community behind them and with that shooting I think they turned a lot of the community against them and it didn't work for them. I'm sure they would say that it shouldn't have happened either. It was a major turning point in the country in relation to the PIRA and ourselves. It was maybe the PIRA deciding on damage limitation and saying, 'look, this cannot go on because we let the community be against us'. I wouldn't say they would be overly concerned about confrontation with us but not having the community behind them would be the biggest problem.

It was a new concept at the time to shoot Gardaí when they were going away from a robbery – it was pretty ruthless – but I think at the time everybody knew that they couldn't continue in that vein. They

couldn't go shooting Gardaí on sight. If they did I think we would have had to go looking at whether we would be armed at that stage. It would have changed things around completely and if it continued I'm sure I would have a different perspective in relation to uniformed members being armed.

One of the Gardaí was armed and he was in plainclothes, but there was a uniformed Garda killed as well, it was a marked Garda car that they shot at and they shot at will. They riddled it. That would have been a turning point for the IRA – either we will continue doing this, we will take them on every time we meet them, or it was wrong. And I would say public opinion dictated to them that it was wrong and it didn't happen again or immediately afterwards anyway.

My family wouldn't really know much about my work. If I went off at night someplace they wouldn't know where I was going. I come from well away from the border. The concept of the border in my home place would be like a different country. They wouldn't know anything about it. The family wouldn't think of the danger or know danger or anything. They might say 'is it dangerous up there?' And you say 'it's not, it's okay' and that would be it then. They wouldn't be concerned about me or anything like that. If you are a bit concerned yourself you shouldn't be telling the country about it and especially your own immediate family; you shouldn't concern them as well. That's my opinion anyway.

When you reside in a small community everybody would know you, but there would be places I wouldn't go, there would be public houses I wouldn't go into, there would be functions I wouldn't go to. I had a few confrontations but I took them on head on, I wouldn't stand back from them and you'd be surprised sometimes the assistance you get from other members of the public. I was involved in a GAA club and I remember once I had a bit of a confrontation but the other members of the club rallied around me and he had to back off.

These incidents were occasional but you would have to select places you would go at times. You wouldn't go into every place in those times. You would have to be careful. I know that at discos you would be careful when you go to the toilet at different times. You would just have to mind yourself. This eased off in the mid to late 80s, the problems were mainly in the 70s and mid-80s I suppose with the H-blocks and that.

I was covering a large border area. We were treated fine by local people – no problem at all. We were working with the support of the local community. I was stationed once in a border town. In those times

the pubs in the North were closed on a Sunday and this particular town in the South was full every Sunday evening from about eight o'clock in the evening – it was all Northern people that came down and they would almost all be Catholics. They would come down, and they would be a bit different when they were going back up alright, a bit more brave. That time we weren't breathalysing drivers like we are nowadays. It was the old drunk driving where you had to walk a line and touch your nose and all that. There would be very few prosecuted for drunken driving but they would be a bit more brave on the way back than they would be on the way down. Some of them would have a bit of an edge to what they would say to you. They would be much nicer going down. You would know the people coming back and over and you would nearly expect from them that they would give you a bit of a dig before they would leave – the bit of green had to come out. You wouldn't be shocked when you would hear one or two comments – the next day they would hardly remember it.

They wouldn't all be that way now – generally speaking we would have a very good rapport with the people in the North. When I was on the border I had tea in as many houses in the North as in the South.

There was no danger involved in it. Usually, the comments would be 'Free Stater 'and all this sort of thing but you would say you were doing your job, you know. You would ask them what job they were doing as well – some of them had never worked a day in their lives. You take people that were involved in dissident activities back in the 70s and early 80s, they never worked. They were 35 or 40 years of age when the Peace Process came in, they were going around shooting and robbing and everything like that and never worked a day. All of a sudden there was a Peace Process and they had to do a day's work so it was a bit of a shock to them as well I'm sure.

I was there to keep the peace and prevent anything happening related to any bombs or shootings going across the far side. Say, if a car was coming down south we would search it and if the car was going up north we would search it. Sometimes we would hear about movement of stuff going north and we would search the vehicle going north as much as the vehicle going south. That was our main job. As regards the whole politics of it I suppose, we didn't think about it, it wasn't our job, we just enforced the laws that we were given and it was somebody else's job to deal with the politics of it. I don't think we would have even considered the politics.

We were there to keep the border safe on both sides. There was a time when we just checked, in the main, people coming south. The ones that were going north they weren't really of much concern to us until maybe we would hear that stuff may be moving north and then we would search people going north as well. But we were more concerned about people coming south and about minding our own patch.

We would have no contact with the RUC or British Army, maybe except at meetings level, organised, formal meetings and that would be with the RUC. We would meet them occasionally, very occasionally, on the border but back in those times you wouldn't meet them, you wouldn't want to be seen meeting them. We would have formal meetings alright, about every month or six weeks at a different level again. I remember once meeting the sergeant from the adjoining station, our counterpart from the far side on a border crossing. He asked to meet us. We said, 'what do you want?' We thought he had something urgent to deal with and he said, 'oh no just a chat' and we said, 'no, not any more, but if you have a problem to bring, address it at the formal meeting and it will be dealt with there and come back to us that way'. We told him we wouldn't meet him again in public, it wouldn't be done, it wouldn't be seen to be done in those times.

We were accepted where we were in the South by our own community and I don't think we would be accepted if we were seen meeting the RUC on a regular basis at the crossings. The local community would be nearly all Catholics and we wouldn't want to be seen talking to the RUC openly. I can't remember it being a formal policy but even if there was a formal policy that we could meet them and rendezvous with them at border crossings openly, I don't think we would do it, I wouldn't do it anyway.

The formal meetings were very cordial. It was the sharing of information. It was like one police unit we would say. There would be sharing of information in relation to things that would be coming up, and what would be likely to come up, and how the investigation was going. They had the same problems that we had generally speaking. They had a problem with dissidents and they had Loyalists and Unionists, we only had the Provos, so they probably had far bigger problems than we had. They were targets at all times – by different dissidents at different times – by both sets of Loyalists and Unionists. We hadn't that, we were never targets really. We had a few occasional ones but we were always told that they weren't sanctioned by the Army Council, all those shootings. But they were live targets at all times, they had to move house and

everything and you would have the person you would be meeting this month and in a month's time they would be gone to the far end of the county, of the North, because they had to move because of some threat to them. We hadn't that. I remember once an old sergeant saying to us about the North and the South and he said, 'leave it to them' he said, 'can you imagine us going up to serve a summons in the Falls Road or up in the middle of Belfast, the work we would have to do'. We could walk anywhere in this country, anywhere to any house, any estate or street – they couldn't do that – they had to have a huge operation to go into a house, they would have to block off the whole town nearly because there would be snipers or whatever around the place. They were police people the same as ourselves at the end of the day but they were in a far more dangerous position than us.

We would have enjoyed friendships and we may have met informally very occasionally, maybe once, maybe twice a year, with some few of them – very informally.

There were no threats from Loyalist paramilitaries, not in our area, but other areas had it along the border. I mind they came and took over a Garda station at one stage, up in Monaghan. Peter Robinson was one of them. They came in and went into a Garda station and took it over and said there was no law and order in the South. He was arrested. It's a small country station, I can't remember whether there was a Garda, did they break into it or take it over or something like that. There you are – 'there's no law and order down here at all, we have come from above, we have shown you what we can do.' Paisley came down and brokered the peace anyway, and then he went back up across to the North. His emphasis was 'peace' and 'thank you' and everything and as soon as he got across to his own patch he turned round and said, 'there is no law and order down there!' It was just a publicity stunt by Peter Robinson.

We operated a fairly tight regime along the border with stuff coming in. Every border crossing was manned, every single one where vehicles could come down, and we kept it fairly tight. But at different times, there would have been a rumour or threat that something may happen and we just upped our level for a while, until they had moved off then again. But I don't think we were awfully concerned, I can never remember a huge concern about Loyalists.

The IRA – I suppose we knew what they were doing and what they were trying to achieve. And I suppose if there were atrocities, we tried

to prevent it or stop it, or if they were planning ones, we searched houses and searched cars and searched people and did all that to try to stop it. If we searched a house, an IRA house, and we were talking to the occupant there and if he said, 'that won't happen', I would be happy that it wouldn't happen. You would accept that, there would be respect in that sense alright. But respect for what they did – I couldn't condone the killings and stuff like that.

At those times when you had active service units, half of them weren't from the border. They came up from down south, Limerick, Cork and everywhere, Kerry, and some of them spent a number of years in an active service unit on the border. They wouldn't be from along the border so they would move from safe house to safe house in different counties along the border, maybe back 30 miles back from it. As such you would have very few active IRA people from the border and in saying that you would have loads of safehouses there where they were staying.

I remember a bomb going off and a number of RUC officers were blown up. In those times the British Army or the British authorities' places – RUC stations – would have been in housing estates to keep them safe from people; that they wouldn't target them with bombs being lobbed into them. This police station was built in a housing estate on the border and three or four of them were blown up. I remember a woman coming down south, a nice quiet fragile woman, she had four kids under five and all she had was remains of brains and everything blasted up against the gable of her house. She had lost her husband and had four kids. I couldn't condone things like that. Let alone the families of the people that died and I'm sure no matter how she felt about the border or about the IRA, or about whatever, Loyalists – she couldn't condone it either.

I recall on one occasion, a car coming down from the North about three o'clock in the morning and this car pulled in front of us. We were in a hut or caravan at the time manning a checkpoint. This car pulled in front of us and it was on the main national primary route, and he got chatting to us anyway, he was an RUC person. We could see the RUC station from where we were standing, and he was seven years in that station, and that was the first time he had crossed the border. I wasn't an hour in my own place before I was across the far side, in the North. He was seven years there, and he had had a few pints taken, except for that he wouldn't be down there. It was a real bravado thing – 'I am

down south', I said, 'how long were you over there?', 'seven years; it's my first time down south' he was saying. I couldn't believe it.

The RUC had a really hard time. They had broken marriages, alcoholics – we all had it – but they had a huge amount of that. They went from work to the pub and back again and they had certain pubs they could go to and all that.

I don't deal with North and South now, I don't deal with the PSNI much now. I did a lot in those times, and afterwards I did as well, after the peace, up to about seven or eight years ago I dealt with them, I would have contacts from there all the time that I could ring.

I remember doing some joint work with members of the RUC a number of years back. When we met in the South we had a great time and when we had our business done we went off for the night and had a great time. But we were up there for a few nights and one night I said, 'are we going to town tonight?' but it was such an operation to go into town. We had to get into a bullet-proof van with darkened windows in it. Six of us went in, one person didn't drink all night, did the driving, they wouldn't even have another driver.

I remember at one point being in Belfast; 'no we cannot go in here', 'no we cannot go in there', and they picked the pub we were going to. Then we had to sit in a certain place and one of them watched and minded us the whole time. That was in more recent times. That's the way they were. That's the way they had to go on a night out. When I saw that I thought 'God we hadn't that', okay as I said earlier there would be places we wouldn't go to at different times and places that we would be careful at discos back in the 70s – but what they had in more recent times – we hadn't that even in the 70s. It was very different for them. That would be my memory of them; I don't know how they survived there. It was fierce hard going. And I would say that they couldn't hide their work at home because they would be saying, 'lock the doors now tonight' and 'don't do this, don't do that.' It was different for them.

There would be a sort of healthy respect between the Gardaí and the Provos in those times. There would be a healthy respect definitely with the genuine Provos. Now the far side fellas shouting and a few pints in them – that would be different. You wouldn't even tolerate them, you wouldn't see them at all, but say the genuine Provo, I would say there was a healthy respect there on both sides. Not to respect what they were doing, but respect for the person, and I would say it was vice versa, I would say so.

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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