

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.

“ I was so
caught up in it all ”



Julien Behal/Press Association Images

I was so caught up in it all

It started off when I was young. My father was a building worker and we had to go to England. When I was in England people attacked me because I was Irish and then when we came back to Ireland they attacked me because I was English.

My father was a moderate sort of Republican – my relations would have been in the IRA in the twenties but I was mad interested in Republican stuff. Before the hunger strikes I used to go on marches every Saturday for the blanket men.

Then when I was working on a building site I met two lads from Derry. One of them lads, his uncle was killed on Bloody Sunday. It affected me. I kinda got into Sinn Féin stuff. I used to read books about the rebels and it took up a big part in my life. I wouldn't go out anywhere unless there was rebel music playing. I used to go to all the H-block marches and stuff and I knew most of the well-known rebels, generally just hanging about with them. One time I was working on a job and there were eleven IRA men working alongside me on it, and some had been involved in the hunger strikes.

Later on then I met a couple of lads who were involved. My friend, my good friend, British soldiers shot his little nephew, he was only 10, they hit him with a plastic bullet and killed him stone dead.

I was going to join the IRA. My friends who were involved wouldn't let me join because I had young kids. I wanted to go up the North but they wouldn't let me. One of them lads did years in jail, they were my friends and I was working with them every day of the week. It turned out that the crowd I was going to join with, they did a bank job and they were all arrested and that put me off then.

When you go to join the IRA the first thing they say to you is 'Do you know your Irish history?' and you say you do. They tell you not

to dishonour the memory of men who went before you – like Emmet, Tone, Connolly and Pearse. Then they say ‘if you inform you’ll get a bullet in the head. You’re not going to get much out of this except you’ll be shot or killed or maybe end up in jail a long time’. They tell you the truth.

At the time when I wanted to support the IRA properly I wouldn’t have minded shooting a soldier but I wouldn’t have liked to plant a bomb. At times the sort of things the IRA did... when kids got blown up... I was disgusted. That lad in Derry that was tied to a seat and sent off to a checkpoint, that to me was... well, there was nothing noble about that, was there?

I would have put my life at risk and that, and I did, storing stuff and so on. I used to store a bit of stuff for the boys like, and the house got raided. One time I remember there was stuff stored in the shed and my wife must have looked in the shed and seen it. She was mad and she told me she’d tell the cops herself so I told the boys to move it and not to put stuff in the shed again. The boys didn’t have much time for me after that.

Then the house was raided. It was early in the morning. I was eating a bowl of cornflakes and I saw two branchmen hopping over the wall – it was an eight-foot wall we had at the back of the house. When my wife opened the front door there was seventeen more on the doorstep. I wasn’t sure if the stuff was gone out of the shed yet or not.

After that raid my wife wouldn’t talk to me. Looking back on it I put Sinn Féin before my children. I was so caught up in it all. My wife used to take the kids on holidays and so on without me. Looking back now, I wish I’d put my family first. I was just so full of bitterness and hatred. My kids, the eldest one remembers the house getting raided but the next one down said, ‘Mammy told me it was the house next door that got raided’. The younger ones were too small to remember. My eldest has no time for any of that stuff now and she has my respect for that. She’s a good kid with a heart of gold, a great big heart of gold.

My attitude is that my involvement broke up my family. They should have been the most precious thing in the world to me.

Thank God I never did join the IRA. I’d like to think of myself as a nice kind person but when they shoot one of yours, then the hatred and bitterness builds and it becomes like a runaway monster. When I look back on it, when I was a young buck of 16, 17, 18, and if I heard

a soldier got shot I used to shout for joy. Looking back now I think ‘Jesus what sort of a person was I at all?’

I just wanted the British Army out of Ireland. I wanted peace in Ireland. I thought that if the Brits went there would be peace. They had done so much damage to Irish people down through the years.

On YouTube the other week I saw a film of an army patrol under fire from heavy machine gun. Some were firing back but other boys were just sitting there behind the wall shitting themselves. To me the British Army were supermen, they were fuckin’ impossible to kill way back then. Now I see pictures of them terrified under fire... they were human beings. I never looked at them as human beings. They were just targets and it was hard to best them. Years ago I would have rejoiced at seeing a human being die. It shows my mentality in them days. Now I think ‘What the fuck was all that for?’

A united Ireland is not worth it when people are being killed. A united Ireland is not worth the life of anybody. Even people who join the Real IRA, they think that as long as the Brits rule part of Ireland there’ll never be peace; but its just a waste of life. I am just glad that I didn’t kill anyone.

When you seen McGuinness and the DUP, when they were talking to each other and smiling, you said to yourself ‘well then, what was all the killing for in the first place?’ But of course back then the Unionists were not always ready to do business either. And how do you negotiate with the British Army? When they were in full swing they weren’t too happy to talk or negotiate. I remember at the time of the hunger strike, I had a feeling something could have been done that time, but Maggie Thatcher, she caused the whole thing to go completely crazy.

30 years ago I wouldn’t have the views that I have now. I’d have thought that Gerry Adams was like Michael Collins – a traitor. My own brother thinks the world of Michael Collins but I used to hate the man because he had turned the guns on his own people.

But you look at both sides now. I don’t know... I’m wondering... I think about it a lot. If I had my life back I would have done it different. Now I don’t even like to hear rebel songs anymore. I see it differently now. I try to figure out why I didn’t see it then. Other people were out enjoying themselves, going to dances and having fun, and I was engrossed in all this stuff – I couldn’t figure myself out – I wouldn’t even go out for a drink with someone if they weren’t rebel-minded.

I am still a member of Sinn Féin because I am disgusted at what I see happening to the poor, but I would never like to see Sinn Féin involved in violence again.

Part of why I wanted to tell my story is in the hope that I can stop someone else going down the road of violence – there's nothing to be gained from it... to me the violence was completely futile and only made the problem ten times worse.

It's not much of a story is it?

Another reason why I wanted to tell my story is that I would like to apologise to people for my bigoted views. I was a stupid ignorant donkey: I hated Protestants even though I never met one.

A mate of mine, he'd been in jail for a very long time, he was a nice lad, he was only a few months out of jail and he went home up North to see his family. He was walking out of a pub when three fellas shot him and when they took off they crashed the car. When they crashed the car the army came out of the woods, it was a situation backed up by the British Army. The three fellas who shot my mate turned out to be in the UDR and I suppose it was that that made me hate Protestants. Even though I never met a Protestant before, to me UDR just meant Protestant.

I met a fella here in Sligo in a pub. Someone came on the TV wearing a Poppy and I said, 'look at them dirty bastards'. Well, he just looked at me and he said, 'I think you're wrong'. 'Dirty bastards' I said, 'I hate them'. He said, 'I wear a poppy'. I didn't talk to him for months after that, every time I saw him I just growled at him. Funny thing was eventually my wife left me and his wife left him and he and I ended up in the same boat and were neighbours. Bit by bit we became friends and now I think the world of him. That man would do anything for you. He has changed my attitude towards people. I've met a lot of Protestants in Sligo and they are the nicest people. I just want to apologise for my bigotry.

I was glad of the Peace Process. I didn't think it would last. I thought Gerry Adams would have got shot to be honest. I seen him on telly last night asking people to come forward about that PSNI Officer being shot in Omagh. I'm happy with the way Sinn Féin are going now and I'm just glad there's peace. Even now, I'm getting less interested in politics, maybe it's the older you get... I don't know.

I don't really care about a United Ireland if I can see an Agreed Ireland where people can have their rights and traditions, and not

be killing each other – and that includes loyalists too. Now we're a multicultural country, Chinese, Africans, Poles, they all have their rights. We have to accept other people's cultures.

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