

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 went from
strength to strength
but it wasn't easy ”**



I went from strength to strength but it wasn't easy

The first thing I've ever really known about Northern Ireland was when I lived over in England donkeys years ago, and my first husband who was in the Army, went over to work there.

At the time he went away I was working back in England and there were two Irish ladies worked in the office, one from Northern Ireland and one from Southern Ireland. I had more problems with the lady from Southern Ireland than the one from Northern Ireland, even though I was more afraid of the Northern one because we were led to believe, through the news media then, that anybody from the North was bad eggs. We were only really told one side of the story in England, we were never really told the full impact of what really happened in the North. The Republicans were the bad ones. We heard of all the atrocities but we were never educated about why all these things happened.

So consequently I was a little bit nervous with the woman from the North, but she was my ally at the finish. Her brother had been railroaded into joining the IRA, according to her and if he didn't do it the family would be at risk – they were living in fear. I think that was one of the reasons why she came over to England. And I kept fairly quiet about where my husband was too. But it came up in conversation one day and the woman from Southern Ireland, she really turned on me. 'Your husband shouldn't be there, they should send all the English back. There is a war going on there'. I was getting all of this really thrown at me, and at that stage I was quite innocent, not knowing the full issues of Northern Ireland. And I would say, 'right, okay, we are in the workplace, I don't want to argue with you, you know, let's just – you have your politics, I have my politics, we've got to work

together'. So there was quite a long time when she wouldn't speak to me, which was fine, but the one from Northern Ireland, she was a lovely girl, she came in and she made more of an effort to talk to me, to make me feel a little bit easier. That would have been in the 70's, the early 70's.

My husband went to the North several times with the Army. He found it difficult. It had a psychological effect on him and I noticed a change in him, big-time. For instance if you were walking down the street and a car would backfire, then he would be down on the floor immediately, he would be thinking it was guns or whatever going off.

He would like to have a drink before he joined the Army, but after it, he became an alcoholic. He would wake up at night in a state too but you see, with drinking as well you wouldn't know where it was coming from – I certainly didn't at that stage, by God I must have been really, really innocent. But post traumatic stress was never really talked about in those days.

They would just up and go to Northern Ireland for a few months and then they would come back for a week or two before they'd be off again. And you never really knew when they were going to go, you know, the second time, the third time, whatever time. There was no support, no support at all for any family. You were just left there and the idea was that you should think yourself lucky that he was going and you were getting money from him and all the rest.

There was no mobile phone or internet in those days either so if something came off the news about a soldier being killed or injured you didn't know if it was him.

We had an arrangement to talk on the phone once a week. He used to phone me to a public box. I remember when it was the coal miner's strike, going off in the dark with my torch to the phone box and if he didn't phone through I knew he was out somewhere and I just had to come back home wondering if he was okay. So that wasn't easy either, you know, it would be another week before you got to talk to him and knew if he was ok.

I would try to ask him about being in Ireland. I would say, 'well what was it like up there, I have never been to Northern Ireland', and he would say, 'well you know, there are some good ones too, they are not all bad', but generally he didn't really speak about it. I would ask him what the countryside was like, and he'd say 'sure it's the same as here'. He never wanted to talk about it. He was trying to fob me off

and shut me up; he didn't really want to go down that avenue. Instead he started drinking more, he would be gambling, going off with other women, you know? The whole of life was turned upside down.

He became more aggressive. Now, you can look at it and ask 'well was it there before all this?' I don't know. Up until that point he had never hit me, but after he started going to Ireland I was hit and bashed around. It affected the children. There was fighting and arguing in front of them and that wasn't good. In the end we bought my husband out of the Army. 'I have to get out' he said 'I can't stand it'. He wanted to get out, he couldn't cope. And I had seen him as I say; cars backfiring, any kind of loud noise and he would be down on the ground. It was all to do with what happened in Northern Ireland.

He was just a regular squaddie. £250 it was at that time to buy him out. It was a King's ransom. I had to borrow it from my father.

I left him. Then like a silly fool I went back to him again, to see if it would work for the sake of the children or what have you, but as we all know that doesn't happen, it's very rare that it ever really works out. I just couldn't take any more beatings, being raped or anything like that any more, so I just made the big sacrifice in that I had to leave one of my children behind. I couldn't afford to pay somebody to look after him while I worked, so I just had to think about leaving, plan what I could take and do it all very surreptitiously. I would move stuff out of the house without my husband knowing.

I let the people at my workplace know what day I was going to move and why, so I could ask them not to say anything to him because I knew he would be on the phone demanding to see me. I made them promise not to tell him anything until I had a day or two to get myself sorted and that was hard.

I would put some of what we went through in those years down to the effect serving in Northern Ireland had on him. From what I knew about him before he went, and what I saw when he came back, superficially things looked to be okay, but underneath the surface there was a lot of differences. There was real violence, you know? I would go to work with black eyes and do the usual story, 'oh I bumped into the door'. But thankfully I had understanding there at work and they gave me the support I really needed at that time, and thank God, I went from strength to strength but it wasn't easy.

I then got divorced and I met my second husband who is absolutely fantastic. He's the only best friend I have in this world, the only one

who knows everything about me. He's taken my children as his, same as I've taken his children as mine, warts and all, nobody's perfect.

So now I have a new life, but not a lot of people know of some of the things that happened back then. But like I said, life is life and you just have to play it the best way you can.

As time went on after my first husband came out of the army, it seemed to go quiet about the North in my life. Then all of a sudden Gerry Adams was allowed to speak and I was actually then beginning to realise what had led to a lot of the Troubles, because it was bloody well unjust. You know, I have been up to Derry a few times – the first time I went up to Derry, I actually saw with my own eyes the wall and how people would have lived in the Bogside. You wouldn't have put an animal there, never mind human beings and I said that to the chap who was showing us round. He said, 'I thought you were English, I thought you were a Protestant', and I said, 'what the hell has that got to do with it? We are talking human beings here not religion, and by God I can tell you that if I had to live there, I would be bloody well creating – you wouldn't put a dog there'.

Then he went on about Queen Victoria and how a statue of her had been bombed during the Troubles. Well, as far as I'm concerned she should have been bombed years ago, because having read up since then on Irish history, she didn't do any favours for Ireland. In the famine stuff was coming out from here, foodstuff, but what were the people getting? Nothing, again. It boils down to not treating human beings like human beings should be treated. The Irish poor were treated like animals, again, and I can't follow the logic of that.

You know, there are a lot of people who can answer for the knock on effects of what the Ireland issue has really done to hundreds and thousands of lives....

When I was growing up, I grew up with a lot of Irish people who came to work where we lived because all the mills were there. Lots of Irish and Scottish people, they were fantastic people. I used to go in their houses and that, and by God, I would get better fed than what I would at home. It was lovely! If you couldn't tell your mother something you could always tell one of your adopted Mammies!

Then I came over here to live in Ireland. At first I found people treated me as an outsider, which is to be expected when you are new. But I found that in the family I had married into, every opportunity was taken to say things like 'Ah sure, you're only a Proddy anyway' or

‘she’s English’ emphasising the ‘English’ bit... well, I don’t go around saying, ‘she’s Irish’ but in my experience there is always a dig at the ‘Proddies’, even now, after 20 years here.

Sometimes people ask me how my husband and I manage, being from different Churches. When I tell them I go to both they might say ‘well, why would you go to two churches? You are a Protestant, you should go to the Church of Ireland’.

We would get remarks too, typical being ‘I pray for you two’, and I would ask ‘why?’ ‘Ah well sure, you are not married, I pray for your souls’. I suppose there have been lots of little comments that have come out, but I’ve got that used to them now, they just seem to go over the top of my head.

It depends on the people I am with really, for some I am just me and that’s that but for others I will always be an English Protestant. I suppose because of my husband being Catholic, I’ve been into more Catholic churches than I have Church of Ireland churches. But I don’t see any difference – all right there is a difference in what they say, and what they do, but to me you are praying to the same God, so where are the hang-ups? A Christian is a Christian, the same as a person is a person.

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