

SILENT VOICES

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For permissions and other copyright-related questions, please contact:

Community & Enterprise Department
Sligo County Council
Riverside
Sligo

Tel: +353 71 9111111

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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.

“It’s a different story nowadays”

It's a different story nowadays

There's more than one type of conflict affects Travellers generally. You were sound, you were half safe as a Traveller in the North I suppose because the sites – the ones that I would have seen certainly – were always in places that were more on the nationalist side. They wouldn't have been in the middle of loyalist areas; they would have tended to be on the edge of housing estates like Craigavon and places like that.

So that's the North. But there's also the conflict between the mainly settled population and the Traveller population because if Travellers are looking for housing in the towns, settled people don't want them in there beside them, they don't want them in the houses, they don't want to give a Traveller family a house in their estate.

Then if you go into the rural areas, they don't want Travellers in the houses there because it's their area or their townland or whatever. They don't want sites built in their area either, even though the majority of people would say that Travellers need to be housed, and they need sites built and they need proper accommodation. But you get what is known in a lot of circles as the NIMBY virus – not in my backyard. The attitude is 'you can house them wherever it is you house them but not beside me'. So until that attitude changes, there's going to be more aggravation and that equally is causing conflict between settled and between Travellers.

Within the Traveller community the conflicts are all completely and utterly crazy at the moment. There was a time when if there was a dispute it would be settled with the two people that the dispute was with, you know, they would go out, get some sort of fair play, have a few punches, bare-knuckle fighting or whatever you want to call it,

and then sort the difference out, shake hands and that would be the end of it.

But with the next generation, the younger generation, I'm talking about the guys who are in their 20s and early 30s, they are gone from that. The younger generation again too. I suppose because of the amount of drugs; – and drugs would have a lot to do with how people behave. Where once a drunken argument was either forgot about in the morning or you had your few punches in the morning and that was that, now it's all-out war. It's a different story nowadays. They don't want to fight any more – they are looking for blood, and because they are doped I generally believe that the younger generation just don't care. When you're drunk, when you're drugged, you have no comprehension of the amount of damage that you're going to do or that you have done already. It's family against family, because they've been on drugs and they're doped out of their brain and they haven't a clue whether they are coming or going.

There is an overspill of violence. Where there is blood drawn or somebody's been cut or shot, then the other family wants to get their own back, so it's a sort of spiral. It spirals completely out of control because if the father or the brother or nephew or whatever gets cut, gets shot, and there is blood drawn, or a woman is cut or there is blood drawn, then it is a family affair. They want to get their own back and if somebody gets killed – and God mind everybody if somebody gets shot or knifed and dies – then they can never forget it. The other family at some stage will say 'my brother killed your brother or my father killed your father' or whatever it is, and that just continues the cycle of violence on and on again.

There is a lot of people trying to mediate, a lot of Travellers are working hard and trying to negotiate with different families, but half the trouble is going on within families – there's fellas fighting and they don't know what they are fighting for because it's been going on for generations and they've lost the reason as to why it began in the first place. Now it's just because it's a matter of your name and my name. I don't like you because you're whatever name you are, and you don't like me because of whatever name I am, and then we both don't like them because they have a different name completely.

The crazy thing is that at the same time they are getting married in and out too, then on the night of the wedding they are saying, 'my

cousin gave it to your cousin' and all that sort of stuff and then there's more war.

So how do you tackle that? Is there a way out of it? I don't know... it has to be hard on them, the families, but I mean, they have to realise, some of them, that somebody somewhere has to be able to sit down and try and talk about it and try and come up with a solution. Where most people will look at the parents or the grandparents in relation to conflict they forget that it's not always the eldest son who holds the title, it could be the second or the third guy who's calling the shots, so there is a lot of stuff that has to be dealt with, there's a lot that has to be gone through in tackling it. There's no easy answer to it and how it's going to be resolved, God himself only knows.

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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