

# 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

**S**ilent 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 was  
absolutely  
crazy stuff”

Church of Ireland  
DIOCESE OF ELPHIN & ARDAGH  
The Cathedral of  
ST MARY THE VIRGIN  
& ST JOHN THE BAPTIST  
SERVICES

HOLY COMMUNION  
9.30 AM 2<sup>ND</sup> 4<sup>TH</sup> 5<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAYS  
10.30 AM 1<sup>ST</sup> 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAYS

NOVENA PRAYER  
10.30 AM 2<sup>ND</sup> 4<sup>TH</sup> 5<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAYS

WELFARE  
THE VERY REV. ALAN HUGHES, M.A. & THE  
ARDAGH RECTOR, CANON E.D. SWAN

## **It was absolutely crazy stuff**

**T**he one thing I always thought when I was a young fellow was that every Protestant in Sligo was rich, until I met a gentleman who used to work in Denny's factory – I didn't know him at the time but he was a Protestant, and he was a poor Protestant.

I looked in the gates of the Protestant Cathedral one day and I saw this elderly gentleman on his hands and knees with a knife going through every crack in the concrete, trying to take out bits of weeds. At the time I was working with Sligo Corporation and they sent me out with a knapsack on my back and weedkiller in it round the town. That would have been maybe 1987 or '88.

I went in the gate of the church, and it was the first time I ever stood in a Protestant churchyard. I went up to him and I said, 'Tommy, get up off the ground and I will spray the path for you'. He used to cut the grass around the graves, but there were areas he couldn't get at along the wall, where there would be bits of nettles and everything, so I sprayed all along the wall, and anywhere I could spray I would, to kill any weeds for him.

When I went round the church everything was great, but when I came round the front where I could be seen from the road it was different. He thanked me, but he wanted me out of it as quickly as possible, and I was also conscious that I was on risen ground in John Street where people could look in from the road and see me. I was conscious that people were looking in at me and saying was I a Protestant now or what? and I think he was conscious in case any of his Protestant brethren come along, or the people that hired him to look after the church, and saw a Catholic in there spraying the path,

so I did it as quick as possible and got out on the road and he wanted me out as quick as possible too.

He was the first poor Protestant I ever met in my life, and a real gentleman, and I think that first time he thought I was joking, that I would never actually come in and do it. He thought I was joking and I wasn't going to do it.

We became great friends afterwards, and I used to go down and do it regularly for him. He gave me a key – there is a side gate of the church, you go in a laneway there at the Lungy, at the retreat house, and I had the key of that gate and I used to go in there when I had the knapsack with the weedkiller.

And I always think back to that and say, 'what was wrong with us, why was I so conscious of who might see me spraying a footpath, helping an old gentleman out, and why was he so conscious, afraid that someone might come in the gate and see me in there?' It was absolutely crazy stuff.



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.

## Acknowledgements

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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*