SILENT VOICES

Community & Enterprise Department
Sligo County Council
Riverside
Sligo

Tel: +353 71 9111111

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.

“There was no other path for me...”

There was no other path for me...

I got involved when I was eleven years of age. How I got involved – there was one event which really sticks out in my mind – I think I was about nine or ten years of age and when we were kids we used to go robbing apples. We had to go into the Protestant part of town at the time, because Catholics didn't have orchards where we lived. The town was divided in half. I always remember coming back down the town and there was this crowd standing shouting 'one man, one vote; one man, one vote 'and the next thing we seen the police charge them. We were only kids so we started throwing the apples at the police because we thought 'why are they doing that, them people are not doing anything'. We didn't even know what 'one man one vote' was at that particular time.

Afterwards, the major event which really influenced me would have been Bloody Sunday. I was only about twelve or thirteen. I was in the local Fianna at that time. Where I lived in Lurgan, County Armagh, the town would have been 50-50 and anywhere we went we had to pass Protestant areas so therefore we were attacked nearly every day going to school from when I was eleven 'til fifteen years of age. I noticed that the police always took the Loyalist side. Even in the schools, the staff would have thought – you're from that area, you're a troublemaker – because there was always rioting there.

The thing I could never understand was, at eleven, twelve or thirteen, the way Protestant minds changed for the Twelfth. My own mother, she minded kids while we were at school, she minded Protestant families' children and we grew up with them. But the 11th and 12th July they were out throwing stones and bottles – but come the 14th or 15th they talked to us as if nothing had ever happened.

I couldn't understand it and they wouldn't speak about it afterwards. I was young then, I understand it now, but not then.

The Troubles were starting then. I could never understand why at every chance, they tried to come up into the Catholic areas. We were out throwing stones – we were only kids with no comprehension whatsoever. So that's the way it was more or less up until I was about fourteen. At fourteen or fifteen I left school. Rioting became more severe and the whole Bloody Sunday event happened. And I became more bitter, by that stage I was out throwing stones and bottles; we were out every night rioting, nearly every day and night. At that particular time the area, believe it or not, was still mixed. There were still Protestants living in it, there were still RUC living in it. On the street that I lived in, there was an RUC man called George. I think he's RIP now, and the reason I say his name is because of an event in my life. My sister was burned to death at nine years of age, her nightdress caught fire, and he was the policeman that came up. He was fantastic to the family; we couldn't have had a nicer man at that particular time. Two years later, there he was, kicking in the door. The change in him and the bitterness within him was totally mind-boggling you know.

The Troubles became more and more severe and involved more and more people. Then you had internment coming in and you had the whole thing out on the streets – watching for the Army coming in, banging the bin lids, and the rioting from internment, and then it ended up in 1976 – I was caught with explosives in the house.

I had been involved with Fianna Éireann since I was eleven years of age. It was more or less like Scouts. You were not allowed as a member of the Fianna to be out on the streets rioting or to become involved in sectarianism or to be up the town fighting with the 'tartan gang' as you called them, but very few people heeded that. They were very disciplined, you dressed up in the Republican uniform and you paraded at Easter and different events. It was the Official IRA because there was no such thing as the Provisionals at that time. But then the whole split came and there was no way that I was going to sit in the house, so I was back out on the streets, and then I joined the Provisional Fianna.

So for the next number of years I was rioting, burning, hijacking. Everybody was. That's just the way we grew up you know – protecting our areas. Every new foot patrol that came into the area, a house was

raided; our house was raided more than twice a week. Every event that happened, if a soldier was shot or a bomb went off, the house was raided. Then we had the whole events of the Loyalists burning the Catholics out of their homes. I'll always remember seeing a young Ian Paisley giving a sermon in the middle of Lurgan when we were coming down in O'Hagan's lorry. We were helping a family to move after being burned out. Joe O'Hagan would have been a well-known Republican who had escaped out of Mountjoy jail. Paisley started shouting 'here's the IRA there'. I can always remember thousands of Loyalists coming towards us. So the next thing, the boys in the back put up the back of the lorry and pointed at them with hurley sticks and let on that they were guns. I would say within three minutes there was about three hundred RUC men around the lorry, so we were all arrested. I think I was about thirteen. I was just held for a couple of hours, the whole lot of us were, and then they just threw us back out again. While they arrested us the Loyalists burned the lorry and all the furniture.

The Fianna were what you'd probably call the junior wing of the IRA. We were only kids. I was only seventeen when I was arrested. The way the judge put it, he said I worked in 'close co-operation' with the IRA. I wasn't actually a member of the IRA; I was just minding guns and explosives in the house.

I got married at seventeen to a girl who was twenty-eight. Her family were staunch Catholic people. Her father was actually a Protestant, her mother a Catholic and they went to Mass every day of their lives. I was well-known for always being out rioting and in their eyes I would have been a hoodlum and always causing trouble. Her family wouldn't have been allowed outside the door or anything like that and once we started going out together, of course they didn't like it. The next thing she was pregnant. She was living with me in my sister's house at this stage and then we squatted in a house, where we claimed squatter's rights and that was it.

She wouldn't actually have been Republican but she wouldn't have been anti-Republican, she would just have been a normal person who wanted a normal life. I suppose at that time I was young and I didn't understand. I thought that was the norm, it was normal for me. When I was in jail, there was explosives found in the shed. She ended up in jail too, because she was living in the house like, but she didn't know anything.

I was eighteen when I was sentenced, so I got life imprisonment. It was February the fourteenth, Valentine's Day. Then I was part of the dirty blanket protest. I refused to wear prison uniform. My wife's reaction to my arrest was more 'shock'. I don't think either of us really thought of the consequences, we didn't even consider it.

There was a whole reddin' out there, because you had the whole Ulster-isation, normalisation, and criminalisation policy kicking in from an early stage. Their whole motive was to get you into jail, hit you very hard sentence-wise, demoralise you and try to get you to put on the prison uniform. Criminalise the whole struggle.

Two of my sisters were married to Protestants. My sister came down to visit me and there were prison officers that lived only doors away from her. There was about six or seven of them in the same street. When we escaped out of jail, she was coming home that day and one of the neighbours who was a prison officer turned around and said, 'Jean, your brothers away'. One Christmas he handed her a book, and the book was 'The Officials and the Provisionals', you know, that whole feuding was going on. I had another brother – he was an informer – and that was hard. I found that out sitting watching the TV.

My involvement would have caused resentment at the time because they would have seen their lives badly affected. It did affect my family at the time; it affected their lives massively like. One sister who actually lived in Craigavon, and that's a Protestant area, and the person who lived across the road from her was Billy Wright, you know. She used to shout at Billy Wright all the time. He would just put her down as a headcase.

I got on very well with my sister's husbands; and still do when I'm down home. I call in and see them and go and have a pint with them and there's no problem. I'd go and visit them now but I wouldn't have gone and visited them at that particular time. I couldn't because I was on the run.

The first nine months in jail was kind of busy, you know with your trial and everything.

You don't really care because you actually lived two lives. There's two people within you, not one, two. There is this person who was a Republican and this person who was a family person and the trick is to be able to switch off, because when you walk out through your front door, you don't know if you're coming back in again. So when

you left the house, I know it's hard to say it, but your wife and kids didn't exist. The minute you walked out the door they didn't exist. Home – that side is gone – it doesn't exist in your mind at all. You have to do that to survive, because if you go out and you're worried about the kids – 'What happens if I get caught, what happens if I do this, what happens if I do that', it doesn't help at all. The other side, the Republican side, dominates you the whole way.

I was married with one child when I went to prison. The child was six or eight months when I was arrested. I seen her a few times when I was on the run and next time I seen her after that was when she was about fifteen. I got photographs of her when I was in jail. Then I never seen her again until she was eighteen. It was pretty tough. Tough on her like, you know. She has a lot, but she's been through an awful lot. Her mother moved out of the area. I didn't see my daughter again until it was all over with and done and dusted. We didn't have it out until she was about twenty-eight. That wasn't nice you know. We would sit and talk and she would say 'I can never forgive you for leaving me'. I said, 'I didn't leave you, I was sent to jail'. But it worked out in the end anyway. She understands now what my life was about. Looking back on what happened – the only regret was getting married. I regret getting married but having a child – I don't regret that one bit. The other kids too – I was there but I wasn't there. They didn't know who their father was. It's only now in this last number of years they have really got to know that Dermot is a normal person. I didn't know what it was like to be normal person. I didn't know what it was like to have a normal relationship. I didn't know what it was like to go out and spend time in normal company. It was always with the guard up. You walk out the door you forget the family piece. You are in prison, you forget about outside, outside doesn't exist. You are in jail and that's it, do your time. I never took visits for two and a half years. When you did take a visit, that's your contact with outside, and once you walk back inside the door, that's it – gone.

I'd say that once I got the life sentence that was it – my marriage was over. I remember her coming down to me when I was in Musgrave Park Hospital. I was taken out of the H-blocks when my ulcer perforated in my stomach. I remember her coming down and telling me you know – that that was it, that it was over and all, but I wasn't mad. I understood it, because I was in jail. 'I will stand by

you' she said, when she was by my bed, 'if you can tell me now that when you come out of jail you will not be involved'. I said to her 'I can't say I won't be involved, I am who I am and I can't change that. That's me and that's what I believe in'. That was it. I didn't see her again until I was back home visiting my daughter. I see her all the time now; every time I go down to visit my daughter. We still talk away as friends. When we met initially we avoided any subject of me and her, we avoided any of that type of talk. You see I wasn't bitter because she broke up; that didn't even come into it because I knew and I understood.

After the whole thing with the H-blocks, the hunger strikes, there was this psychiatrist came in from America, one of these top psychiatrists and he turned round and said after so many years you become institutionalised. He interviewed quite a number of people who were on the blanket and he said that he never met more sane people in his life. At the end of the day, it's all to do with yourself and what you believe in. There is this thing inside you, that you can't explain to people, but it's there, and it looks after you, it's your driving force for the whole time, that thing inside you. And it's because of that, you can turn on and off.

It's a battle with yourself. Your first year in jail is taken up with your trial, your second year is accepting your sentence and accepting your trial, and the third you start thinking, and start questioning, why am I here? Why am I in? I've found over so many years that so many Loyalist prisoners became born-again Christians. I believe that one of the main reasons why that happened was because they themselves had no identity. They were in there allegedly fighting a war. But the same people who I was fighting in that war were locking them up. Keeping them in jail.

In '77, we got moved up to the cages in Long Kesh for four or five months then we got sentenced and brought to Crumlin Road. They cut our hair, brought us into Long Kesh and gave us the prison uniform and said, 'put that on'. I was in the H-blocks during the hunger strike of '81 – from start to finish. I knew all of them personally.

I think that the first year on the H-block was pretty severe, because you're in a cell for 24-7 and we were sent to the young prisoner's wing because we were under twenty-one years of age. There was a particular screw there and he gave us a very, very hard

time and we had to sit on the chair from seven in the morning 'til seven at night. We weren't allowed to move. If the table or anything was dirty they'd be in beating us. Any time they opened the door you were supposed to give your number, which we refused to do, and they were in beating us. I wouldn't stand for the anthem; they would be in beating us. And when we went to Mass on Sunday, we all had to march in a single line and we weren't allowed to talk or look right or look left. They were severely hard on us in that line. Any time we left the cell, they had Loyalist prisoners and ordinary prisoners on the far side and then – 'the dirty Fenians' – it was never Republicans, it was never Provos, it was always 'Fenian'. The amount of sectarianism was unbelievable.

In H3 we had it very hard and then we were all moved to H5, and we were the mad ones, we were the ones that wrecked the wing, broke the windows, smashed the beds, fought with the screws. Anything we were supposed to do, we done the opposite, which is wild you know, and continued on like that right up until the very start of the dirty protest.

I think the worst time was when Bobby died. I'd say that is the most soul searching I've ever done. My whole world just collapsed – it was total and utter dismay. Very hard, you know, to put it into the right words, but that world, that protective world you have round yourself, just a shell – collapsed. It was because the Republican Movement is as close as your family. We still are, all ex-prisoners an' all, like, still very close. Living in such an environment we needed each other and we lived off each other's strengths.

Bobby was well got, was very well liked, and see the night when he died, in one sense your whole world was empty – this is it. It was that it had actually happened. Even though you knew at the back of your heart, the back of your mind that probably this was going to happen because it was strategically planned that way. But there's a part of you that believes it will never happen, and it's that wee bit there that just – the only way I can describe it is – it was the only thing that could get through every bit of defence in me. It just hit you straight in the heart. There were no defences, absolutely none, just bang. But you soon close up again.

There was total silence; you could have heard a pin drop. We sat there for an hour. We had heard the news on the radio, we had smuggled in radios. Bik came in first thing the next morning but we

already knew at that stage. It was devastating like. But then we soon picked up. Nobody really wanted to talk, nobody really wanted to hold conversations, everybody was sort of down in themselves, and then that night we just got up and started talking at the doors, just started picking up and talking about what was happening to the rest of the hunger strikers because we got a Dáily update on their health. At that stage we were able to hold it together, be very dignified, not react to any abuse by the screws. The screws were coming round then once it was lock up, coming round saying, 'ha ha the bastard is dead'. We just wouldn't react to it at all, we didn't. I had been very close with Francie[1], and Raymie[2] was cribbed across the hall from me and I'd been living with him for years. Martin Hurson used to be in the next cell to me.

When Francie died it didn't have the same effect as what Bobby did and that's because Bobby Sands was the first. So that hardens inside, the defences were back up again and we wouldn't let it go back in again. That's the only way I can describe it like, we wouldn't be open again. Francie, before he left to go to the hospital wing, the last memory we have of Francie is he sung Tom Williams, that was his favourite song. He sung that the night before because he knew he was getting moved to the hospital the next morning. We had intended, for the hunger strikers, to get up to give them a big concert in the wing before they moved up.

I put my name down at the start for the first hunger strike but unfortunately anybody who had any illness wasn't allowed on hunger strike. I had the old perforated ulcer so I was excluded on medical grounds. When it first happened, when they said there is going to be a hunger strike, a lot of people put their names forward but then anybody with any medical condition, eye, ulcers, diabetes was ruled out because it meant it would have been a shorter term on hunger strike, so it wouldn't have had the effect that it was supposed to have – that cut a great lot of people out. But we all did actually go on three-day hunger strikes which, when I think back, was stupid, because the only thing we were doing was inflicting pain on ourselves.

I would have gone on strike, no problem. I know it's an awful hard thing to say but you don't care how your parents or family would

[1] Reference to Francis Hughes, the second IRA prisoner to die on the 1981 hunger strike

[2] Reference to Raymond Mc Creesh, the third IRA prisoner to die on the 1981 hunger strike.

react. Because if you worry about your parents and your family then you are defeated before you start. But my mother actually did say to me afterwards, she said, 'son, I wouldn't have let you die, I would have taken you off it'. I said, 'Ma I would have made sure you didn't come down'. I would have signed it over to my sister. I was one step ahead of her, but that's just a mother's love for her child and I can't condemn my own mother for that, or any parent, that's understandable.

Men were still coming forward and putting their names forward. It would have kept going on and on, we wouldn't have given in. It kept going like, and the more that died, you'd be questioning in your head thinking, 'we are going to lose this battle.' And then with the names all going forward you'd think there is bound to be something happening, something will come out of it. Obviously it did in the end.

People have said that there was an agreement between the Brits and the Republican Movement about the hunger strike. (It was in O'Rawe's book[3]); there wasn't an agreement. I know O'Rawe and I know Bik McFarlane, very, very well. I escaped with Bik and I know him from remand and I regard him as one of the most honest and genuine people I have ever come across within the Republican Movement. Bik printed actual comms[4] – in the Irish News I think it was – the actual comms that was referred to and proved that there wasn't an agreement.

When we were moved up to H7, one day one of the lads said to me 'look you're doing life imprisonment, did you ever think about escape' and I says, 'not really like' and he said, 'if you had the chance to escape would you escape', and I said, 'no problem'. And he said, 'what would happen if you have to kill a screw?' And I said that would be no trouble either. And he said, 'don't say anything to anybody and I'll come back to you on it'. He had the same conversation with my cellmate but he never said anything to me and I never said anything to him, until three days before the escape.

It was seven months between that conversation and the due date for the escape. It wasn't mentioned. You never do that – you just wait and they will come back to you. And so when he came back

3 Blanketmen: An Untold Story of the H-block Hunger Strike, Richard O'Rawe, February 2005

4 Comms was the name given to the small notes of communication which were smuggled into and out of the jail

he just said, 'look we're having an escape, it's on Sunday. It was supposed to be last Sunday only the screws went out on strike and the RUC were brought in so it was moved to the following Sunday'. He said, 'I talked to you before, you know the position, you know what to do'. That was it. I still never said anything to my cellmate who had a part to play and he never said anything to me.

It was at the back of your mind for the seven months. But you just bided your time. But that particular morning, holy God I'll never forget it because we got up that morning and how the guards never copped on something was wrong I'll never know to this day because everybody, not now the whole wing, but all the ones that were involved, they were all going to the toilet! The screws with any intelligence would have said, 'there's something wrong here' but of course we were thankful because they'd given us curry the night before – the first time ever in there!

We were playing pool. That particular day none of us knew what was going to happen like. The next thing your man was on the pool table and he's looking at me. I said to him; 'do me a favour go over and sit at the TV and look at the TV and don't turn round, I'll be here about ten minutes', and he said, 'what? what?' and I said, 'just do it', and then two minutes later the whole thing kicked up.

I had to be on the pool table because a screw was sitting right beside the pool table talking to your man and he didn't know. So he copped me and he kept looking, he knew something was happening but none of them ever dreamed what it was.

We just read out a statement saying that we had overtaken the whole block and we returned the other lads back to their cells for their own safe keeping. That's it. I had overpowered a screw. That particular aspect of it was all over in thirty seconds. In every wing – five seconds. In five seconds every screw was taken, all at once, and you're still thinking, 'is this actually real', even though you're doing it, and you're part of it.

Never in my life will I ever forget that journey on the back of a lorry from the Blocks to the Tally Lodge. It was a knife edge, you could actually hear the grass grow, you could hear your veins tingling, you could hear the wheel bearings in the wheels and you could feel the tension, just unbelievable like.

The lorry stopped at those high security gates to go through and you say 'right that's the first one' and then the second one, then we

came up to the Tally Lodge and actually the screw who was driving the lorry was under the impression there was a bomb; so we were pulling in this side of the tower and he said, 'pull in this side so the cameras can't see you from this side'. It wasn't out of love for any of us; it was sheer fear I would say. He was that much under control.

You see a prison officer had been shot and he thought 'this is going to happen to me now if I don't do what I am told.' Pure fear like.

When we got out there, the boys went in to take the Tally Lodge. We were late. I'll never forget the look on their faces when a whole lot of us jumped out of the tail; they only thought it was four or five people at that stage. They never thought. It was obvious at that stage, but they never dreamed, they were standing there and the next thing thirty eight of us jumped out of the back of a lorry and they were totally stunned, they were stood there with their mouths open. At that stage it was every man for himself while the fighting was going on.

We found out afterwards that the Brit in the tower actually looked and scratched himself on the head – saying, 'the Paddies are mad, they're down there fighting with each other'. He didn't know it was us. He thought it was screws fighting screws because we were wearing prison officer's uniforms. I ran towards cars in the car park and we were pulling at handles, 'cos at that stage we were in a bit of a panic, all sense goes out the window and then you think 'what in the name of God were you doing that for – you can't even drive and you have no car keys'! So at that stage we were piling up on top of each other to get over the fence, then there were screws standing with guns and spanners and swinging them at everything. I heard shots going off to me left, I ran over and I think it was Gerry Kelly's shoulders I got up on to get over the fence. And I'll never forget running up that field, and I was fairly fit, I was playing soccer five days a week, but half way up that field I was out of breath. I said, 'we'll never make this'. My whole chest was caving in… but I jumped over a hedge and out into the middle of a road. Here's me – you're away!

There was eight or nine of them away ahead of me, then there was another man jumped over, it was Bik McFarlane, then another man jumped over. We were running down the road and we seen the other boys hi-jacking this car, getting in the car, there were legs and arms hanging out the window. And I thought there's no way we'll get

into this car… and I looked up and there was a bungalow to the left. I said to Bik, 'look – there's two cars up at the house', so we ran up to the house and the man opened the door. He wouldn't give us the keys of the car, neither would the woman, but the son came out and he handed them over.

There was a gun stuck to his head and we said, 'here, give us them keys.' I wasn't armed but a couple of us were armed. Anyway the son gave us the keys and we got into the car. There were eight of us. We headed off, we were going towards Belfast and then we said, 'no, probably too much of it will be cordoned off', so we turned around, towards Dromore. We took over a country house, the people were Presbyterians. It was one of those country houses where you can lift up the garage door and you can drive right into the house, so we did that so the choppers wouldn't see us from the air. We stayed there until dark.

There was the woman of the house, her husband and two kids. They were pretty scared. We used psychology with them. First we told them the SAS was outside and if they got us, they would shoot us on sight. Then we told them we were taking their son with us. We done that to stop them from going to the security forces. But then we found out they were born-again Christians, so we said to them 'there is an alternative here, if you give us your word, swear on the bible that you won't go to the security forces for three days, we'll leave your son'. They agreed to that and they didn't go to the security forces for three days. But they did go to a Presbyterian Minister and they told the Presbyterian Minister and he says, 'you gave your word on the bible and you have to honour your word on the bible'.

We stayed in that woman's house until a heavy fog came down that night and the chap was going to work and we moved out. You see we went through all the Protestant areas. We were cute because all the Nationalist areas would have been sealed off. So we lived for five days in the fields. Walking the fields for five days, drinking the water out of the cow's troughs and eating crab-apples.

I was thinking – we done it! We're out! Even if they catch us, we're out now. We done it. We broke the jail. We broke the system. It was supposed to be the most fool-proof, escape-proof prison in Western Europe. They were supposed to have supergrasses, to know every piece of information on the IRA. Here the IRA were. In actual fact,

had it worked to the detailed plan, we would have been across the border quite safely and there would have been a statement released saying the IRA went in and took IRA prisoners out of Long Kesh. The roads were mined; there were units in from South Armagh in certain strategic positions. If it had worked according to plan, and we had been on time, we would have taken control of the Tally Lodge, we would have held onto the two screws outside. It went wrong because we were late and they were coming on and off duty.

You're focused on getting as far away as is possible. We knew that they would kill us if they caught us… it would have been handing them cake off a plate. You don't really go there but on the other hand it's in the back of your mind. You tell yourself that you're not going to give them any opportunity to take you out. It's the SAS and MI5 you're most concerned about but if it was the RUC or the UDR in the right place, they would do the same thing. There's this big place in Guildford beside the river but we couldn't cross the river so we decided we'd send someone out and suss out a place where we could cross. We crossed that night and we ended up staying at this big manor house. When we were there, the dog was going mad, barking and barking and this big country squire came out. We were in the hedge and we seen him looking and the next thing a cop car pulls up and two RUC men got out of the car. I'll never forget it, never, never. I knew from that minute onwards I was never going to be caught. They walked right up to where we were in the hedges and Bik said to everyone – 'not a word'. It was very heavy shrubbery, greenery; I could see the pupils of his eyes. He was smoking a cigarette… and he just twisted and turned and walked over and said, 'come on get into the car' and drove on. Every single one of us said, 'here – there is no way he could have not seen us'. Whether he did is a question I could never answer. It was amazing but this feeling came over me, you know when some thing like that happened, the hairs on the back of your neck would rise. It was like a calmness came over me, I said to myself… we're not going to be caught, we're going to get away. So we bolted down and ran.

We crossed the river and I'll never forget that one. There were eight of us like and there was this guy fly-fishing and he was so concentrated on the fly-fishing that the whole eight of us walked right past him! He never even seen us! We did this in broad daylight. It was the first time we ever moved in daylight. We managed to get

into a bit of a forest and we moved through for about half a mile and we said, 'right, we'll wait here'. We were waiting on the choppers going up because we were all convinced that he had seen us and he was going to get back up, but there was nothing.

So, we walked from there down to Crossgar and Crossgar onto South Armagh way. It was funny, most of us were from cities and towns, we had no real country experience. The only one who really had the experience was Seamus Mc Elwaine from the countryside and he told us what way to walk around the fields, how to walk, don't climb over a gate, every way to do it.

Normally you go into a field, you throw the foot on the gate and over, but you couldn't 'cos you left muck on the gate. A farmer will always be able to tell, these were signs, or a foot patrol would know people had passed over the gate. You don't walk across the field, you walk around the field – you're leaving too many open for a target. If you are leaving the field, just pick a place that's central through the hedge. Or if someone is in the field and you're there and a pigeon or anything is flying over your head… a pigeon will always fly with its wings outstretched, but if there's a person below, the wing will come up, so they would know there's someone down below. These are all the things that you learn.

At the fourth or fifth day we were starving, we hadn't ate a whole lot, so we said, 'how are we going to get food', so I says, 'we'll chase the cows around and we'll milk the cow, drink the milk.' We were chasing around in no shape, no energy at all so I says, 'fuck it, we'll shoot it and then we'll milk it'. It was a bullock! I got slagged about that one… !

We were going to hi-jack a train which is easily done because if you put the signal down, the train has to stop. We said we'd do that – get us into south Armagh and then see what happens – but there was a bomb on the lines. There were so many bombs on the line the Brits were on the lines the whole time, so we decided against it.

We arrived into South Armagh. We were in this particular area and there were three houses and we were looking to see which house we'd go to. Seamie McElwaine, God rest him, Seamie said, 'that house there, that's a Catholic house'. We watched that house and in the morning we saw this fella leaving the house and we all went down. Some went to the back door, some went to the front door and we knocked on the door and this woman answered and

we said, 'excuse me missus, we're escaped prisoners, can you help us? 'Oh come on in' she said, 'the whole lot of you'. She made us all breakfast.

That evening we told her son where to go and who to see. He knew the person so we were able to give him a note. Then night came and we went across the border, four of us slept a couple of hours until before dawn and we came back up to South Armagh again and we were in this ditch.

There they were in the full military gear, armed and all, the IRA protecting us and the Brits landing in the fields…and they said to us don't worry they'll not come in this direction. Such a sensation like. We could see them all getting out and heading off in the opposite direction. They said we were safer here during the day than we were at night. They were ecstatic to see us. I was the only Armagh man who had escaped, not only that, it was the whole thing of the supergrasses and the effect that was having on the 'RA: the escape busted all of that wide open…it busted the H-blocks wide open and that was a severe blow to Maggie Thatcher. We were at elite level like.

I think one the greatest sensations I had was when the cars came at night five days later to take us away. We were sitting in the cars and these cars were going 70 / 80 miles an hour, it was pitch black, you could see nothing, no lights, no nothing and the Brits were lying around the corners. It was amazing… and we were safe.

We didn't know where we were going. The cars came and took us across the border and we kept crossing back and over until we headed away then to Leitrim. We stayed there until such time as we started moving about and doing different things, then people were split up all over the place.

We just more or less laid low, I couldn't say this for definite but I believe that it's part of the Republican movement's psyche… let them see how hard it is to go on the run, mentally. So you were messing about a couple of places for month, more or less moving from safe house to safe house. This was life on the run and you'd come across other people on the run for years as well, who had done different things, they were wanted, and they'd say, 'look this is it'.

The most difficult thing about being on the run is not seeing your family. For months and months, you didn't see a colour TV.

Different things, you'd think about your family and what they're going through and you think about your comrades, you'd be lying there at times, you'd have to get moved, down here there would be raids and you'd be moved to a lot of houses and sometimes the safest place to be was lying out in the fields and you could be sitting there night after night and you'd be thinking, 'am I have to going to live the rest of my life lying here'… things like that. At times like that, I always thought of the hunger strikers, I always thought about what the boys would think.

There'd be nights walking down a field and something trips you… you know real pissing rain and you'd be walking across a field, walking across a ditch and fall, and that time you'd say to yourself; 'I was better off in Long Kesh than this'… but not in a serious sense if you know what I mean.

There are people out there and you know they were like mothers and fathers to us, absolutely fantastic to us. It's a whole different life in the sense that you have a whole new family – they are your family – your secret family. For them people, some of them were business people, some of them would have held very, very good jobs, some of them would have government jobs, that was life for them with young families growing up, to have us 'on the run' in the house. If we were caught in the house, they were destroyed. And some of them were very involved in their own communities, in the GAA, or handball, different things within their community and they would be totally destroyed and ostracised by the community if it was ever found out. These were the people who sacrificed all that.

I did not expect that from people. I didn't expect the calibre, right across the whole board, of people. It was mind boggling, the amount of support. Some of them didn't even support the IRA, but they'd let you stay in the house no problem. 'I don't support you but there's always a bed there for you if you need it.' I think it boils down to the old Fenian inside the Irish person… that's what I put it down to. Some of these would have been hardline Fianna Fáil – some of them would have been high up in Fianna Fáil – not at government level – but high in their cumanns – Fine Gael, the whole lot. It was mind boggling, the amount of people and that is the hardest part of it, they can never be acknowledged for what they have done and I wonder how it is for them. In some sense, they are the forgotten people, not by us, but because of their particular circumstances.

We were never worried because these particular houses would have been tried and tested for other people who were on the run, not necessarily just from the state. A safe house is a safe house. If it's a sound house, it's a sound house. And you do everything in your power to protect that house.

I think the hardest part after you got out of jail was that you're still thinking like you're 17 or 18 years of age – but I was 28. But that was my mindset, you know. And it's very hard to adapt to life outside, very very hard. It was eight months before we even got out for a drink, before we got the confidence to go out for a drink. And I'll never forget, we went into a disco up in Galway, we were sitting talking to these ones, and one said to me 'wait until the slow set comes..' and I said to meself 'what's a slow set..? There was all these coloured lights. I had never seen anything like this in my life. Never. So, we were out dancing and I looked up and I seen all these wee wheels going round, and I says, 'God you'd think you were flying on a plane'. We were supposed to be out and not be conspicuous!

It was like shooting forward in time, if you know what I mean! All of this was alien to us… and we learned how to handle money… but the way we were behaving, it was obvious we were either two rednecks from the asshole of nowhere or two stupid Provos!

We were in different houses and there would have been different people looking after a certain amount. The eight of us moved for a while, we stayed with one family for a considerable amount of time, maybe three or four months. The kids knew… they loved us… they used to come out walking in the fields with us at night, you know for exercise an' all. We wouldn't go out during the day. It was funny, people used to call to the house. I remember on Christmas Day we were all sitting around having our Christmas dinner and this boy called to the house and we all had to go down to the room and wait in the room and he stayed for 5 hours! We'd have grabbed the plates had the food been out but it wasn't out!

We stayed with that family for a considerable amount of time. You become very close to the families. And they become very protective of you. And I wonder, I often asked this question and I still do – their own children, what was going through their heads? Like, 'do my ma and da love him more than they love me? Why are they getting the attention?' What did them children think at that time? They were absolutely fantastic people.

A good few of them I have gone back to see. We can go to these people because years later their cover was blown. They were more afraid that we'd get caught and go back to jail than they were afraid for themselves. But again it was like that two sided coin, the minute you walk out that door and you're away from that house it doesn't exist until you come back again.

If anything happened while we were there you would always do everything you could to make sure that the family wasn't in any danger. At all times, they came first.

We weren't armed. They wouldn't give them to us because they said if we were stopped at a checkpoint or we met guards, we'd be less inclined to persuade our way out of it, rather you'd be bull-headed and say… 'here….'

You're always depending on people for houses, safe houses in different areas. We were moving around in different areas but we'd come back to the likes of Sligo, Mayo, Galway and that would have been classed as coming back for a break. You might be out doing work and you'd be away three, maybe four months and you'd be coming back to let the hair down every few months.

I met this girl here, I was living openly and signing on the dole in Sligo and she had a flat so I said to myself…'I'll not depend on anybody anymore'. Her circle of friends, some of them were in the Irish army and all that there and when you're moving in that sort of circle of friends you don't tend to come under the microscope. Then we had a child together. We lost our first child, three days old and we couldn't do anything big. It was very hard for her at that time. My name at that time was Dermot Hanigan and she had to tell her family I worked for Digital. That was the storyline because I was always away. I was away and coming back all the time. It was hard for her.

Then came the time that two of my friends (escapees) were arrested and they were sent to Portlaoise. They were caught fully armed. They got twelve years or something in Portlaoise. They finished their sentences. Meanwhile the judgement had come out about extradition and then the next thing the two of them got released from Portlaoise and they weren't arrested for extradition.

At this particular time, I noticed too that the Special Branch were passing the house on a regular basis and I was thinking they never done this before. So the next thing anyway, I was brought

to court for fishing, poaching salmon, and it was under the name Dermot Hanigan. The inspector stood up in the court and he said to the judge, 'I don't believe this person to be who he says he is'. I just turned around and looked at the judge and I says, 'I am'. He fined me a thousand pounds for one fish. So I wouldn't pay the fine, pure badness, like. So, I was arrested then under the name of Dermot Hanigan.

I was going up to Mountjoy in the back of the taxi with the two cops and half way there the cop said to me, 'you see Dermot when we go in here', he says, 'don't use your right name', he says, 'still use the name Dermot Hanigan because it won't make any difference but it means you'd be brought back to court and you'd be tried, it'd cause too many problems, just go along with it.' So, obviously they knew at that stage who I was.

I went into Mountjoy and I remember going into the governor and he says, 'how long did you get?' and I says, 'I haven't a clue'. I knew rightly I was doing five days. He said, 'what are you here for?' and I said, 'I took a fish out of the river'. He says, 'you wha'?' I say, 'I took a salmon out of the river'. He says, 'where are you from?', I says, 'Sligo'. He says, 'head home'.

I was going out the Mountjoy gate and a man who used to work in Sligo happened to drive past in the car and he stopped and he said, 'what the fuck are you doing here?' and I said, 'I got arrested for not paying the fine'. He says, 'are you going home?' 'Aye'. 'Jump in'. And he left me off… I was just coming up from Magheraboy and I turned the corner and the guards were coming down, the same two who had dropped me at Mountjoy… they nearly crashed the car. I was back in Sligo before them!

So, I says to my wife – it's time now – you've got to go and tell your family who I am. At that time, they'd know me well. I had two kids an' all at this stage and I was married. And I was married under my own name and I was living with her.

I think it was the 10th anniversary of the escape when they did a thing in an Irish magazine… a 'where are they now?' story. They were all telling their different stories and a reporter for the Sunday Times landed to the house. And of course, me being me, I had no comprehension whatsoever of the media, of reporters…I was like a lamb to the slaughter. He was interviewing me about the escape an'

all and I said, 'there is nothing they can do because of the Finucane judgement about extradition'.

I said, 'I'm married and living in Sligo'. He questioned me you know, what did I think of Gerry Adams securing this Peace Process, which was at initial stages it must have been the early nineties. I said, 'I fully support it'. He was going out and he said, 'off the record' he says, 'why did you not go to America?' I says, 'there's no war in America'. So that was alright. The next Sunday – headlines in the paper – 'escaped bomber tracked down to hideout in Sligo'. Big massive article that I had trained IRA volunteers to bomb England and all this crap that he put in the paper. I said to myself…'Jesus, you know'. Ken McGuinness and the Unionists were up in arms; the Brits were going mental about it. It was brought up in the House of Commons and everything. It was all over the papers. The media was down outside the house and everything.

There was not much my wife could do. It was all over the papers and I was under pressure like… but I was like a lamb to the slaughter. I'd say if you ever asked me, I'd say it was the biggest mistake I ever made in my life. I should have been a lot cuter.

I had been a long time in and around Sligo; I knew a lot of people and the amount of phone calls that I got. Dermot – 'are you alright – do you need help?' 'Do you need a bed?'…from people I would never have dreamed of. Most people said, 'sure I've known him all my life, he's not that type of person'. Basically then pressure came on and I'll never forget the day I was arrested for extradition up in the house. Even the guy that was arresting me, says to me, he said, 'Dermot, this is a political exercise. This is going nowhere.' So, that was it – Portlaoise. I was there for 3 months. I got bail that time and I had to sign on for two and half years. I had to go every day to the barracks and sign on… this was before the whole thing of prisoner release.

They didn't know who I was, even me neighbours. After that incident, me neighbour sold the house and left. She was afraid of her life. My son was well clued in. I don't know what was going through his head, when the reality hit him that his father was this person. Him and my daughter had a hard time, like. They didn't talk to me about it. I would have been headstrong. I would have confronted it straight away… I would think they told their mother and their mother said, 'whatever you do, don't tell your father'. I would be

99.9% sure that's what's happened. But I often talk to my son about it now… he says, 'I just wanted to be my own person. I didn't want to be known as the son of Dermot McNally who escaped out of jail. I wanted to make my way in life as me', which he did do. And all the time the guards raided my house and all that, they were always in bed sleeping. They never actually seen the guards raidin' the house or anything. Never seen me getting arrested or anything like that. It was hard for them… when the holy communion or confirmation was on, I was in Portlaoise.

It was all over the news… I'd say all their friends knew. It was all over the news and papers when I was arrested. There was no doubt. Everybody knew.

The escapees stay in contact. When you talk about emotions, that was something similar to the hunger strikes and when the hunger strikers died… the same emotions happened with the Peace Process, like. That transformation of coming from conflict to no-conflict… that was one of the hardest battles I ever had in my life. You're in turmoil… you feel you're betraying. These are all things that are going through your head. It took two or three years to come to terms with it. Longer even.

The hardest thing was coming to terms with the transition. It's your whole life… everything from, you may as well say conflict from 11 years of age right up until you're 40 and all of a sudden that part of your life is over. No, I was not equipped to deal with the new life. The biggest challenge was being responsible. Learning how to pay bills, learning how to lead an ordinary life, not look over your shoulder. There's death threats on my name from the UVF and the UDA so just being down home (in Lurgan) having no worries, being a normal person, it's all different. People often say to me…it's the first time in my life that I've made a decision as Dermot McNally – no politics, from the other side, just as me. I'm rearing kids now where I'm there as a father the whole time.

The life that I was used to was a closed life. If I was in the house and I was there with the wife and kids, I would say, 'I'm sorry, I have to go.' I was gone out the door. She didn't know if I was coming back in a week, a day, the next morning. If anyone came looking for me… she had to say I was just gone. He never said to me when he was coming back. It wasn't an easy life for her under any circumstances.

I miss the life. I do actually miss that part of life. People say, 'sure you have a family'. But the Republican family, I missed it. When I was eleven years of age and throwing stones and bottles and petrol bombs, there came a time in my life when I reached a stage when I said, 'I want to throw more petrol bombs and I want to become involved in the cuttin' edge'. When you're at that cuttin' edge for a long period of time, then that's the only thing you know in your life. Then all of a sudden that's gone. That's over.

Nobody wants to see anybody dyin'. If I was looking at the TV and there was a soldier being buried, and you see his family, I wouldn't be heartless but it's not the person, it's the uniform. That's the hardest part of it you know. What can you say to people? If somebody came up and started accusing' you in the middle of the road and started shouting, 'you killed my son', 'you shot my son' or anything like that there… or their son was in the RUC or in the British Army – it was the uniform. You didn't know, you wouldn't have known who that person was or anything.

Your first reaction when you go in as a child, and I was a child, I had no experience, no nothing, I was more of a reactionary you know. The first thing you think is that the IRA will take over and run the whole country. That's what's in your head. That's what you think. Until you start to become politically aware in yourself. In my lifetime I actually thought, and hopefully still do think, that we would have a thirty two county Republic… now with the nature of change in politics throughout the whole world and especially in Europe an' all. We are all European citizens now anyway up or down. I believe the whole dynamic between now and the early 70s, it's all changed. But I would most love to see a whole new radical change in Ireland. And I think it will come about. I think you're seeing the start of it where I never thought I would see it; down here in the South.

People's attitudes towards me have and haven't changed. 'Yes' in the sense that they accept who I am – the Maze escapee – the Peace Process and that enhances it. But there are still people out there who would say 'terrorist'. They would not say it to my face but if you scratch the surface it's still there. There was certain ones that would be very hostile towards you, more hostile than they would to anybody else. For a lot of people there's a fear factor there as well. They'd be afraid of you. You'd know that by just talking to them and looking at them, you know. Just afraid of that whole thing… you

know, he's a terrorist, he escaped out of jail, he was one of the ones in the H-blocks and all this here and there's that fear he must be – you know – a psychopath.

When you notice it, you kind of just go along with the person and you try to ease their feelings. If they broached the subject, it would be no problem talking to them about it but if they didn't I wouldn't talk about it. But most people now would slag you or there's ones would sit and have a serious conversation with you. There's other ones and it would still be 'them and us'. It's still there you know. It hasn't gone away. There has been a gradual change over the years. Even now with the guards, I happened to be at a couple of weddings and guards were there and maybe Special Branch and they would come up, they'd wait 'til they'd have a few drinks in them, half jarred and they'd some up and say 'Dermot, I hope you've no hard feelings, you know we were just doing our job.' I would say 'I hope you have no hard feelings, cos I was only doing my job'. 'The only difference is, I says, is that you got paid'. A lot of them – the guards – in one sense they mightn't have liked you but they respected you. I didn't go around slagging them. I didn't go around abusing them or anything like that. That is me and that was me. What you see is what you get.

They (the Gardaí and Special Branch) would still pay attention but not as much. They pass by the house. They would be outside the house nearly every day. They still check certain events, like the Easter commemorations, parades… it's not to see if you're still involved, it's to see that you're still with the Republican Movement because if you weren't they'd think you'd be away with another faction. They would still keep an eye on known Republicans.

The happiest moments were when we all got together. There were times and events when we'd meet up together and we'd have great craic… and then we'd all go our different ways again. There were lots of times when you'd meet people that you'd stayed with for years and years. You'd happen to bump into them, at some occasion, like a fleadh or something like that… and you'd have to find an opportunity to go up and talk to them so nobody would think 'why is he talking to them?'. You would talk then as if you just met them at the bar, then you'd sit down and have a good conversation. And they'd be happy to see you; the unfortunate thing is, when you walk out the door, that's the end of it again.

I do have friends who I suspect are involved with dissident groups. I still treat them as friends. I've had conversations with them in terms of the present situation. My attitude is very simple, at some stage, no matter when it is, they'll still have to come back to this point in the existing Peace Process.

I feel sorry for the young fellas, 19 or 20 years of age who are joining an organisation when I don't see any reason why they should progress right from the beginning to where it is now. We have achieved what they are saying they want to achieve. You have to have a strong political party. You have to be strong. They have no political party. What I say to them is 'why do you not all come together as one and see what happens, end the lot, come in as one, they might not agree with all parts of the Peace Process but come in and see what happens. If you're not happy in four years time, fall away again'. The biggest killer of the Irish cause all the time has been divide and conquer.

I believe that quite a large proportion of the population would understand my perspective. There's probably a section out there who have never heard it. And more who have only heard the propaganda coming out from watching the TV.

I do think it's important to get the story out there. I think they should know. I hadn't a choice. There was no other path for me but only that path. That was the unfortunate circumstances of the time I lived in and the area I lived in. People say, 'you could have been this, you could have been that'. You couldn't, you didn't have them opportunities.

If people see the story and they read it, that fear element should go because they should know exactly where we were coming from. We were labelled as terrorists, psychopaths, this and that. All of a sudden, they're reading the exact reasons why you became involved in the conflict.

To go down that path and live that life was quite an experience, an adventure in finding yourself, in finding a true meaning, in finding the true you. I have no regrets whatsoever. I found life fulfilling. I have recovered my relationship with my kids. They come down here and I go and stay with them and the grandchildren and I would still be on very good terms with both my first and second wife and they with my partner.

No, none of my kids got involved in politics. They would be nationalistic minded. It didn't disappoint me. I can honestly say that I brought them up to make their own decisions. That's what I wanted. I made my decisions and if they for instance, join a political party, say Sinn Féin, I want them to do that because it's what they believe in.

If any of them had chosen the route I had chosen, I would have talked to them, and I would have made sure they were doing it because of their own politics. I'd have had a very, very serious talk with them, told them the realities. This is no glorified life. It's a very, very tough life. It's a hard life. I was so young, I was sentenced to life imprisonment and I thought I was going to be there for the rest of my life.

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