

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.

“Nothing is simple”

Any further communication on this subject should be addressed to—
The Secretary,
War Office,
Imperial Institute,
South Kensington,
London, S.W.7,
and the following number quoted.

Effects Form—No. 45 (W.G.)
WAR OFFICE,
IMPERIAL INSTITUTE,
SOUTH KENSINGTON,
LONDON, S.W.7.

5th May 1920.

E/ 226477/1/ (Accts. 4.)

Madam, I am directed to acquaint you that the sum of £13.0.7

(thirteen pounds and sevenpence)

is due from Army Funds to the estate of the late No. 10893,

Private James Conlon, 1st Battalion, Connaught

Rangers,
on account of War Gratuity.

The Command Paymaster, Eastern Command, Science
Museum, Exhibition Road, South Kensington, London, S.W.7,
is accordingly being authorized to issue to you the sum of
£2.18.10 and to brother John and sister Bridget
the sum of £1.9.5 each and to brother Michael the
sum of £7.2.11 in all £13.0.7.

Should no communication on this subject be received from

the Paymaster within the next few days, application for payment
should be made to him by letter.
The amount issued to you includes your share of
the War Gratuity due to deceased plus Alexander's
share of the original estate which is paid to you
as sole legatee under his Will.

I am, Madam,
Your obedient Servant,

C. HARRIS,
Assistant Financial Secretary.

Mrs M.A. McLoughlin.

(7 11 20) GD2276/1 127,000 5/18 HWV(F402/1) H18/112
W2212-HP9251 126,000 5/18

Nothing is simple

I remember being home from England – it’s funny, you come home from a country that’s just given you a job and been feeding you and then you’re down the town holding black flags in O’Connell Street against what that government is doing to men who are dying. I stood on O’Connell Street with black flags in ‘81, when the hunger strikers were dying. There was a lot of hatred in Sligo town, you know. I can see how there was a huge recruitment to the IRA around that time, it was nearly impossible, it was kind of do or die: were we going to let fellow Irishmen starve to death and stand by and do nothing?

I remember at the time the Irish Government just seemed to be helpless. Maybe if you look at the figures about the size of the British Army and the size of the Irish Army, well then maybe they were helpless, but I remember for a week two there seemed to be such a feeling of – ‘well here’s Bobby Sands has died now, so what’s the Irish government going to do?’ It seemed as if they were going to do something then, but of course they did nothing. And then there was helplessness, then people thinking, ‘well, if they’re going to do nothing, well, then it’s down to us’.

Personally, luckily, I always looked upon men dying of hunger strike and people being blown up as human, as human beings, and that we were all human beings, it doesn’t matter what flag we were standing behind. And you know, to me, I remember the hunger strike – I went and protested because a man died, a man starved to death, and that had to be a tragedy. Now that’s only me personally. Of course there was other people saw it different...

I honour and remember the dead men and the decisions they made on what they thought was right – on both sides. So I go up to the Cenotaph on Pearse Road in November and I march up to the

Republican Plot at Easter. I lay a poppy wreath at the Cenotaph in November to honour those who were in the British Army in the First World War like my mother's family, and I march to the Republican Plot at Easter to honour those that were in the IRA because my father's side were all Republican. My grandfather's brother mutinied in India in 1920 when he was in the Connaught Rangers and he was sentenced to death. That was reprieved and he came back here and joined the IRA, so that's my father's side of the family.

How many men fought in the First World War and came back and joined the IRA? Loads of them. It was actually the men that fought in the British Army in the First World War, who were trained to use guns, they were put in charge – Quartermasters of most IRA brigades, they trained the young fellas how to use rifles.

Talking about joining the British Army I know the Catholic Bishop of Elphin preached from the pulpit telling young men to join, and I know his car was available on Tuesdays and Thursdays to bring men to King house in Boyle if they wanted to sign up to the Connaught Rangers. He put his car at their disposal to bring them up and join the British Army.

It was also a great adventure for young fellas. Imagine if I'm 18 years of age and I'm going around Sligo without a pair of shoes on my feet, and in 1914 or 1915 I am told if I join up I'll have money in my pocket, a lovely new uniform, that the war will be over by Christmas and I can go and see France? Today it'd be like going to see Mars or to see Jupiter, because if them men ever seen Dublin it would have been great, but to be told you're going to France! So for young people it was an adventure. It wasn't that they were anti-Irish that made them join the British Army and go to fight the First World War, and that's proven by how many of them come back and joined the Republicans, the IRA, and joined the fight for Independence, and took sides in the war of Independence and the Civil War.

There is a great thing in Sligo about the Noble Six who were shot on the mountain.

What happened was that Republican forces ambushed and killed three men from the Free State Army and wounded three more in July 22 at Rockwood. In the September, two months later, the Free State Army took a reprisal action. They were aware of an IRA unit on Benbulbin Mountain, and they surrounded and attacked them and six of the IRA members were shot dead. Dubious circumstances

because the bodies were found in different places and some of them were shot in the head I believe, but they were the Noble Six, and they lie in Sligo cemetery in a large Republican plot.

But, you know, nothing is simple – one of the men that lies in that plot, one of the Noble Six, he was shot in 1922. His father is buried in France, he was killed in 1917 in a British Army uniform, and that lad, the Noble Six lad, his mother went through life with the British Army pension and an old IRA pension. And that wasn't uncommon in this town, you know.

I still call myself a nationalist, but maybe I'm not a Republican you know? I would like someday to see the 32 counties, but I don't want it done by pushing a million people into the sea. And I think Europe and European law will eventually do away with the border – we can call it what we want to – a united Ireland or whatever, but it will all be ruled by the one law and it'll be all one in the end anyway.

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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