

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.

“We didn’t know half of what was going on”



We didn't know half of what was going on

When I was younger, in the early 1980's, we had been in Scotland for a while and when we came back we lived in Fermanagh. And because there was no halting site round where we were, it was our first time actually living in a trailer as a family. We had family living in Fermanagh and they knew of this woman, who had a kind of an old farmhouse, and there was nobody living up there. She was kind of a friend of theirs, she used to mind stuff for them, sure we didn't know half of what was going on, God help us.

So we pulled up and we were in the mobile, there were six of us and mother and father. We pulled up and sure, this oul woman to me was like a woman that was basically real old rural Ireland, the west of Ireland. She was going round with her bucket feeding her little animals and the devil knows what with her kilt on her and her glasses.

Well, one morning she came over to the side of the trailer, I'll never forget it for as long as I live, and she says to the oul fella, 'sure now, you won't be letting the wee ones over there this evening'. And I was looking at this woman and thinking to myself sure you wouldn't go near anything belonging to her because, well, you wouldn't know what would come out of the sheds and bite you! That's the way we seen it, we were only small. But once she says that you cannot go over there, sure that's like a red rag to a child like and you're going to hoke for all you are worth! So I looked at the oul fella and he looked at me and he says, 'oh no lady don't even go there' right? Then he says to her, 'is there something you have in it like ma'am', because God help us, he was trying to be a pure, nice little fella'een. 'Well, you'd

never know now, I have a wee few things left out for the boys that'll be coming round the night, you know'.

Lovely! So what we discovered anyway as the weeks went on, was that in the evening times she would get an odd call, and she would know when the lads would be coming across the fields, coming across in the dark of the night. So she kind of tipped the oul fella off, 'if ye hear any noise now it would not be in your interest to be coming out of the trailer you know'. What? Come out of the trailer! The man would never have done it. We were terrified. I think he slept in his clothes with his boots on! That's the truth. And me mother with the rosary beads, four of them around her neck and two in each hand, she'd leave you weak! So we knew there was something going on then because she'd be like a rattling box!

So the oul woman used to leave clothes out, a bit of food, a bottle'een of alcohol I suppose if they were going through the fields. But the most thing she used to leave out, and this was an awful thing I suppose to admit, was a gun. She'd leave out a gun and like you couldn't go near the sheds, Daddy wouldn't let you go near the sheds at that time because he knew then, the woman used to tell him the things she'd leave out.

Well Daddy, the oul fella, he said it to our distant relative and he said, 'aye well you know the boys comes across the fields there, because that's coming right across from wherever through that part of Fermanagh'. So that was that and this went on for months with the oul woman. She was obviously a Catholic woman, we were Catholic and we wouldn't pull up there if she wasn't. Then all of a sudden this oul woman wasn't a real oul woman to me at all, do you know what I mean? She was like a young woman dressed up so as to cover for the lads that was going around in the night.

Anyway we were in the trailer one particular night, and we got up in the morning and we were going to go to school. The oul fella was petrified, he said the trailer was rocking the whole night. He was going to bring us to school and he was coming down the road and he was shaking. I said, 'What! This is not good for my nerves watching you, the way you are going on!' We didn't go to school we went into Enniskillen, and the street we were after coming up the day before, right across from the bridge, the whole street was gone! The whole thing was gone. Everything. I said, 'Daddy was that there yesterday?' But he said, 'that must have been what happened last night'. He

called me mother by her name like, and she said, 'o we better go home, in the name of God we better go home'. The whole street was blown up. That must have been nearly the height of the Troubles, when that kind of stuff was going on. We were living at a farmhouse in Fermanagh where she used to leave out guns, and they were blowing up half of the town in one night and no talk at all about it, and then, the curious thing about it was, you would see vans and cars pulled in trying to go in to buy the damaged goods. The bombed places weren't even cold! They were still on fire kind of job! I used to find that weird. But it was very, very scary.

We were coming across the border one time, I was in the back of the van and my mother was in the front of the van and the old fella got out. He was going across the border that many times, there was a triangle he could get that let you go across the border if you wanted, and we were hours and hours at the border trying to get this sorted out. Daddy cannot read or write so he was answering questions, trying to read forms, fill in about this and that. But Mammy, she wouldn't go in to the soldiers if she got all the money in the North of Ireland. She wouldn't put a foot outside the van. She was terrified of her life of the soldiers. But anyway after hours of him going from one to the other trying get the papers sorted and get the triangle, he eventually got it so he thought he was the bees knees, no soldier would ever stop him again. Oh please!

While we were waiting on him to get the triangle, I saw something that I don't even believe I seen. Well, you know them things, they were like a tank with a big gun thing on top of them? Well, I used to think that these things were in films, you would never think you would see one of them in reality.

So we were in the back of the van and I said, 'oh look' and me brother turned round and he said, 'Mammy look at the thing at the back of the van, at the windows, and the gun going round!' and this gun was going round, brrrrrrr. My mother was weak and she watching the gun God help us. Us kids were not paying a bit of heed once we had seen it. We just wanted Daddy to come out so we could get on and go and visit Granny. But wasn't there a jackhammer going on the side of the road. And me mother thought the noise was the gun coming in the back window of the van. Seriously. Because it was pointed right at the back window! She nearly had a heart attack! But me father, he never seen the tank but he'd seen the jackhammer,

and he gets back into the van and he said, 'what's wrong with you?' and she said, 'I'm never, never coming back to the North again'. She was back that evening. The soldiers was in kinks when they realised what had happened because they seen her jumping and saying her prayers with the rosary beads! She was terrified. God help her, she was terrified. She remembers it to this day.

One of the crazy things I do remember was that after a few months at the oul woman's farmhouse my mother put in for a house. Unlike the South of Ireland we had a brand-new three-bedroom house within months, a brand-new state-of-the-art house. My mother was in shock, she couldn't believe it. She was on the housing list at home in the South for years and she couldn't get one, she went on the housing list in the North and she got one in a matter of months. So that was an incentive for her to stay there, it was terrifying for her like, but she stayed there.

She went to the North because there was no money in the South of Ireland at the time, but she thought there was a few bob to be got in the North and you do whatever you have to do to get a few pound. They were selling clothes out of the back of a van at the time. Seemingly they were told, the oul fella told us afterwards, that there were particular areas you can go to and other areas you cannot go to. But there was an awful fear; truthfully my Mother had an awful fear.

We were in the house anyway and we went to school. We had a school play, and of course mouthpiece here was in the school play, wasn't I. Black and white minstrels they were doing. They asked me if I could speak Irish and I said, 'what's that'. I didn't realise at the time that because I was a Tinker, I was cut out from being taught Irish in the Free State at school. Well, they wanted me to go on stage singing the national anthem in Irish because we were having a play. I didn't know what the national anthem was, never mind sing it in Irish! Anyway, we were coming back from town and the radio was playing the 'National Anthem' – we must have had an English channel on. But I didn't know the stuff that was going on in the North, because when the schoolmaster said national anthem what did I do? I went to a nationalist school and I was singing God Save the Queen. Well, it was God mind me after that. There were two or three girls, and one of them looked at me and I said, 'what's wrong with you?' and she said, 'what's that song you're singing?' and I said it was the national anthem I heard on the radio in the van. The schoolmaster was standing behind me

now and he wasn't a bit impressed either but because I said it was on the radio in the van, he said, 'oh, leave her alone'. The reason I got away with it was that I was blow-in from the South, not because I was a Tinker, but because I was blow-in from the South.

I nearly got me guts put out on the road that time all over God Save the Queen. I don't think I ever sang a thing after that. I'll never forget it. When they told me about the Queen and who she was – well my nerves! She nearly got me killed – she did! Without me even knowing it! I'll never forget that.

Going down to the North another time, at this time I was married to a Northern Ireland man, well, he was from the Armagh border, yeah, he was 'the dude' all right and all that stuff that goes with it! So, he had a wallet that was done in the Kesh, it was in the front of the vehicle going across the border. He stopped at some fella's house buying or selling something, and didn't I put me hand into the front of the van to get the money. I had no bag only this purse. As far as I was concerned it was a jail purse, and it was nothing but bad luck and misfortune because there was trouble in these prisons over these things.

As time went along I discovered that this was an armchair Provo that I was married to you, know? and when I took out the jail purse, he went luminous, he went luminous because I put me hand in and brought out the purse and it was sitting there on top of me knee.

He was green but sure it meant nothing to me. The other man looked at me, that I was giving the money to, you know because of the purse, and I said to him 'oh don't mind that shitty thing'. He never said a word to me, but the other fella was nearly melted going down through the seat. Then the man said to me 'do you know something love, your naïveté', he said, 'is so genuine'! He was in kinks laughing. I said, 'OK, whatever', and I gave him his money. I was oblivious to what was going on; and I didn't care either, truthfully.

One very, very scary day with my beloved ex-husband, we were going to his homeplace and it was quicker to cut across the North to get to where we were going. I had two of my children with me in the front of the van, and without me knowing he put up a tricolour on each back window of the van. Oh he did. He put my life in danger and the lives of my children, you know. I didn't know that I was going through the North with two tricolours in the back windows of the van and I with my children in the front of the van. We were going to see

their granny that they only met every four or five months, so I was fixing them and making sure they were ok, then they'd think their mother was a tidy bit of gear – at least she got them out of the gate before they were filthy again!

Next thing this car started beeping behind me, but when I say start beeping, I mean like a lunatic and it overtakes, and the car driver he starts making the most vulgar of signs. But the driver of the van was equally as bad making vulgar signs and beeping and whatever else. Next thing the van I am sitting in with my two children starts going tail to tail with the car on a small side road and I thought 'one of us is going to be killed and it better not be me, yes'? They went on for a good bit of the road and my ex was calling him the black Protestant this and the black Protestant that and I said to myself 'okay you're at something'. I said, 'what's going on?' Well, says he, the tricolour is in the back window. My heart nearly stopped. I said, 'stop the van, stop'. He wouldn't stop the van. We got to his mother's place a couple of miles down the road and he pulled in the van. I got out and his mother came out to greet us and I didn't even say hello to her. I got out of the van, I opened the two back doors, I got the tricolours and I danced on them, and when I was finished dancing on them I put them into the fire. But when I put them into the fire it was like slapping a bold child. And his mother said to him 'what did you do?' because he was her 'boy' and he was bold! Now, truthfully the woman was disgusted about what he had done, but if people like that were going round Northern Ireland in the height of the Troubles, it's no wonder that so many innocent people got hurt.

He was in his 20s. He had seven years on me. There's a lot of armchair Provos and there's a lot of people thinking that they're doing this that and the other. What type of conversations are they having in the pub? Putting a Sinn Féin poster on the back of the van in the West of Ireland – who cares who you are voting for? It was to show that he was interested in the 'RA, but that kind of stuff wasn't healthy for anybody. It particularly wasn't healthy for my two children in the front of the van on that day. Anything could have happened.

Things were better for Travellers living in the North. Its not that there wasn't as much discrimination but it wasn't as open because their problem was avoiding bullets, and I'm not trying to be flippant about it here. Their problem was staying alive. They were more against one another because of being Protestant and Catholic than

for being settled and against the Travellers. Now it's a few years into the Peace Process, but when you go up the North you can find more of a prejudice against Travellers now. You can feel it now. It wasn't evident in the North before but now you can actually sense it and feel it in some areas. And that's genuine like, you can.

I can feel the prejudice in the North of Ireland, but truthfully, you could still go in to a premises in the North and get served. But if you're on a market or if you're going selling or different things like that you may watch out. I would worry that the level of discriminatory practice in the North has gone up so fast in such a short time. What level will it get to as time goes on, I ask myself? And the fear is that when people take things to the limit in the North of Ireland, they really do take them to the limit.

I've been told by groups that are in the North that there is an increase in racial attacks and discrimination. Because the Protestant/Catholic issue is seen to have gone away – even though it hasn't – the impact is that it's increasing against Travellers and against marginalised groups generally.

It's not all going to go away just because of the peace treaty because human nature is human nature and they are feeling the loss of what they lost in all those times. The politicians might sign off on A, B, C, and D, but there are human beings that are feeling that they have been forgotten about in it all and that's where the real work is to be done. That's why you would have the fear. There's an awful lot of reconciliation work to be done in the North and believe me it won't be finished in 50 years time in my opinion.

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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