

## Voices of the Liberties

*This evocative book brings you into the lives of families living in the Liberties area of Dublin from the 1900s to the 2000s. A collection of photos, letters and journals captures the rich humanity of this historic part of Dublin.*

### HEIRLOOMS & HAND-ME-DOWNS

Chris Reid (editor) - Dublin City Council

If you go to the Liberties, you'll see a number of bronze heritage plaques on the distinctive red-brick Victorian walls round Nicholas Street, Bride Street, Bride Road and Ross Road. On these plaques are un-ascribed quotations about the area and people living there.

One such plaque reads: "The hill was steeper, the street narrower. The surface was all cobblestones. When the winter weather made them freeze, horses struggled to climb. Sparks flew from their hooves."

Another reads: "If you really love something, and you have it - then no matter what it is, I think you deserve it. We are only caretakers for the things we have. I am lucky to have this flat. It is all I really have and I really adore it. I think I take care of it the best I can."

There are 21 in all. The 21st plaque explains that this is a public artwork project completed by Chris Reid, and that the texts are based on recordings Reid made from 2004 to 2008 with residents and people associated with the area.

This book is the accompaniment to that project and fleshes out the quotations. Reid spoke to over 40 people to assemble an oral history of a number of Liberties families over the past 100 years. From their stories and memories, he assembled the 158 short narratives which make up this book.

The narratives are divided into the decades of the 20th Century from the 1900s to the 2000s. Memories range from the warm to the brutal. There are running themes: the British army which was a major employer in the area until the 1950s; trades such as printing and rags; families; neighbours; the church; education; snobbishness; drugs; pubs and dance halls; emigration; the Troubles, both pre-Independence and in the North.

In the first half of the century, there's more overt poverty: TB, sanatoriums, no hot water, not quite



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enough food or clothes, houses collapsing and too much discipline, including corporal punishment, from parents and teachers.

But there's also more community, no drugs, less crime. Children play on the streets all day, houses are left unlocked, everybody helps out - when women go into hospital to have their umpteenth child, neighbours look after the children at home. So the tabulation of which period was 'better' isn't cut and dried.

The last section, the 2000s, is elegiac - the people interviewed are generally old and the impression is of the twilight of a community. We don't really get the perspective of the younger inhabitants, including perhaps immigrants and yuppie couples, who make up the 'new Liberties'.

This seems more the history of a community than an area. The people behind the narratives

aren't named. Some wished

to remain anonymous so the decision was taken to shroud all in anonymity.

This creates a *Finnegans Wake* sense of a stream of Liberties voices, but presumably Reid has fully annotated and identified transcripts for future historians of the area to consult.

*Heirlooms & Hand-me-downs* is an important piece of oral history, meticulously and scrupulously recorded. It has been assembled into a notably handsome book with evocative photos and well-produced transcripts of letters, journals, ID cards and ration cards.

This would make a great present for anyone interested in the Liberties, Dublin, working-class history, public art, or evocative books.

My father was in the British Army during the 1st World War. He got some medals but when he left the army he pawned them and never redeemed them. My brother, he was in the British Airforce during the 2nd World War. My father was mad to know about it. He used to say to my mother, 'I can't get a word out of him'. My brother got the Burma Star and all, but he never even wrote away for his medal. He said he didn't need medals to remind him.