

Jennifer May catches up with Chris Reid who has compiled 'Heirlooms & Hand-me-downs' – a book that has captured the essence of a bygone era by 'giving history back to the people and allowing them to give it a voice.'

Heirlooms & Hand-me-downs

- A living history of Dublin

'...The Iveagh Market, you could get your food there... she'd get her meat off Mr. Flynn... and of course then she'd give you the pram to bring home and she'd be in the wash house washing, right, or then she used to run a bill in the shops, the shops around the corner used to run the bills, right, and say she need bread or milk during the week, we always got the milk – the invalidity milk, me ma used to get it for me and me brother. He was only born a pound, the size of him now, he's like Hercules...'

Written history can be a dry colourless affair, often lacking real feeling. Capturing the true essence of a time, place or person is a rare gift, and as Chris Reid's work (a permanent art installation and a beautifully produced book on the Nicholas Street, Ross Road, Bride Street and Bride Road areas of the Liberties, Dublin) shows, the best results can be achieved by giving history back to the people and allowing *them* to give it a voice. By having the confidence to allow those voices speak for themselves – plainly and without artistic embellishment – Reid has actually created a masterpiece. Tragic, funny, insightful, beautiful and real, 'Heirlooms & Hand-me-downs' is a remarkable work, and should become compulsory reading for us all.

Undertaken as part of a public arts commission and funded through the Per Cent for Art Scheme, Reid's work takes the form of 21 bronze texts on plaques displaying quotes from the residents of the area. Affixed to the exterior walls of the flats, they will stay there permanently: a unique and inspired approach to art, every plaque an individual gem painting a stronger history of a community than any picture or sculpture ever could.

This isn't the first time Reid has worked in this medium. He created another work, 'Dublin Memories', collecting audio from people and

turning their deepest feelings into art. 'I wanted to target people whose experiences I thought would be interesting and would create a new heritage of Dublin that would be different and quite immediate,' Reid explains. 'Different experiences – experiences of not fitting in, embarrassment or shame – things people wouldn't usually include in a heritage.'

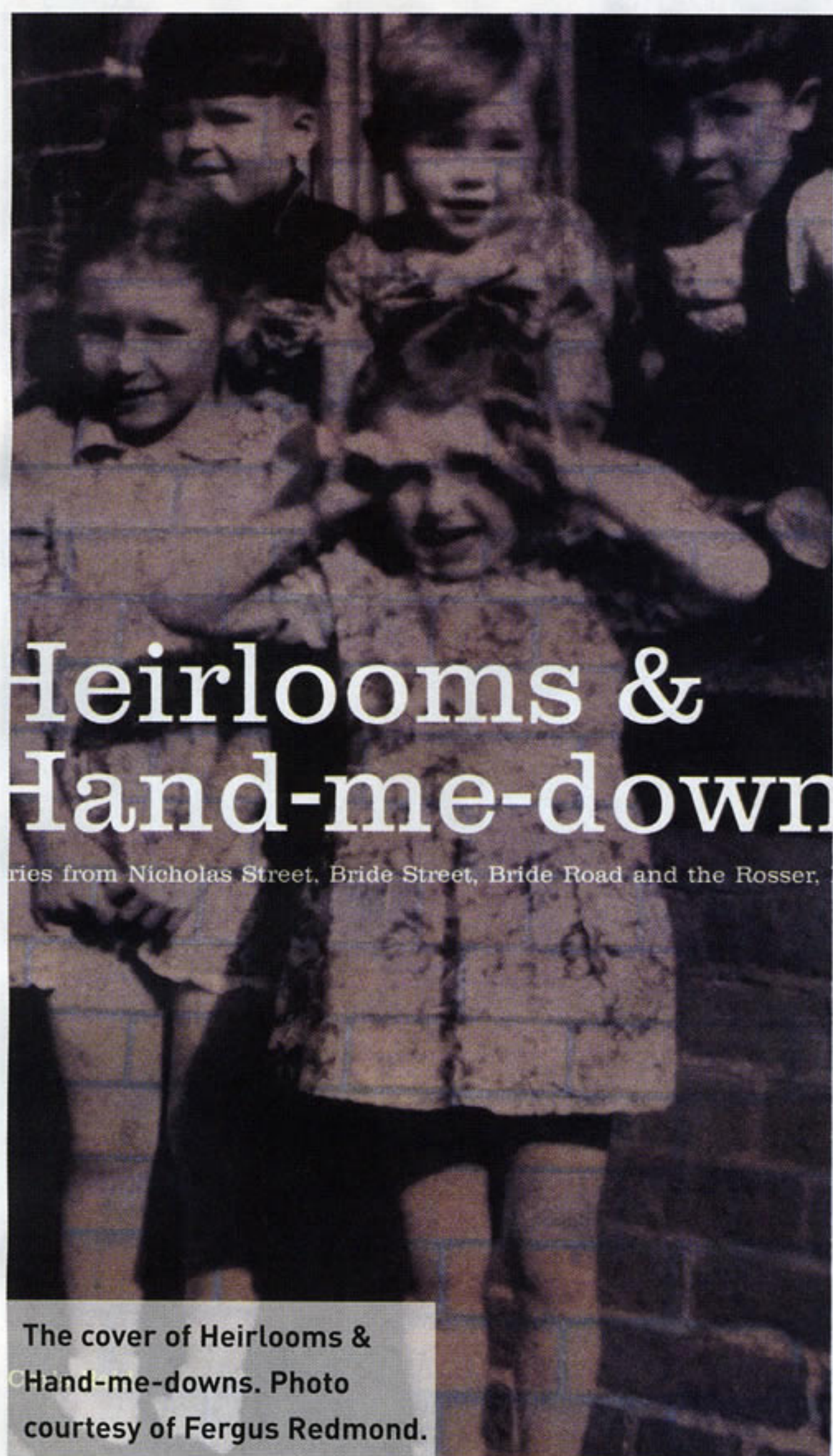
Reid then created plaques around these recalls and, with the permission of the participants, temporarily attached them to a corresponding relevant site around Dublin, photographing it and later removing it: the results were later published in a book, and would be the inspiration for the *Heirlooms & Hand-me-downs*' project.

'I immediately had the idea of taking the Dublin Memories project and applying it to this project,' he explains, *'but the context was very different as I discovered once I started work.'*

He found that going into the Liberties as a stranger, ringing on doorbells, asking people to share their memories was going to take time; people were not going to give up those precious details of their lives until they were certain of how they were going to be used. 'You get a mixed response doing something like that,' says Reid. 'A lot of people didn't answer, a lot of people would say "no". But then you'd get a few people asking you to come in and you'd know they were interested. But there is a lot of sensitivity when you are working with people's stories, so realising that I would have to tread carefully and gain their trust, I took my time getting interviews.'

Reid's sensitive approach worked, and his work – stretching from the 1930's up to the present day – is a unique insight into the hearts and minds of a community; the kind of community that is rapidly disappearing along with the suburbanisation of our lifestyles. It shows us how much we have lost in moving out to often soulless satellite towns, and how, despite

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Heirlooms & Hand-me-downs

Stories from Nicholas Street, Bride Street, Bride Road and the Rosser.

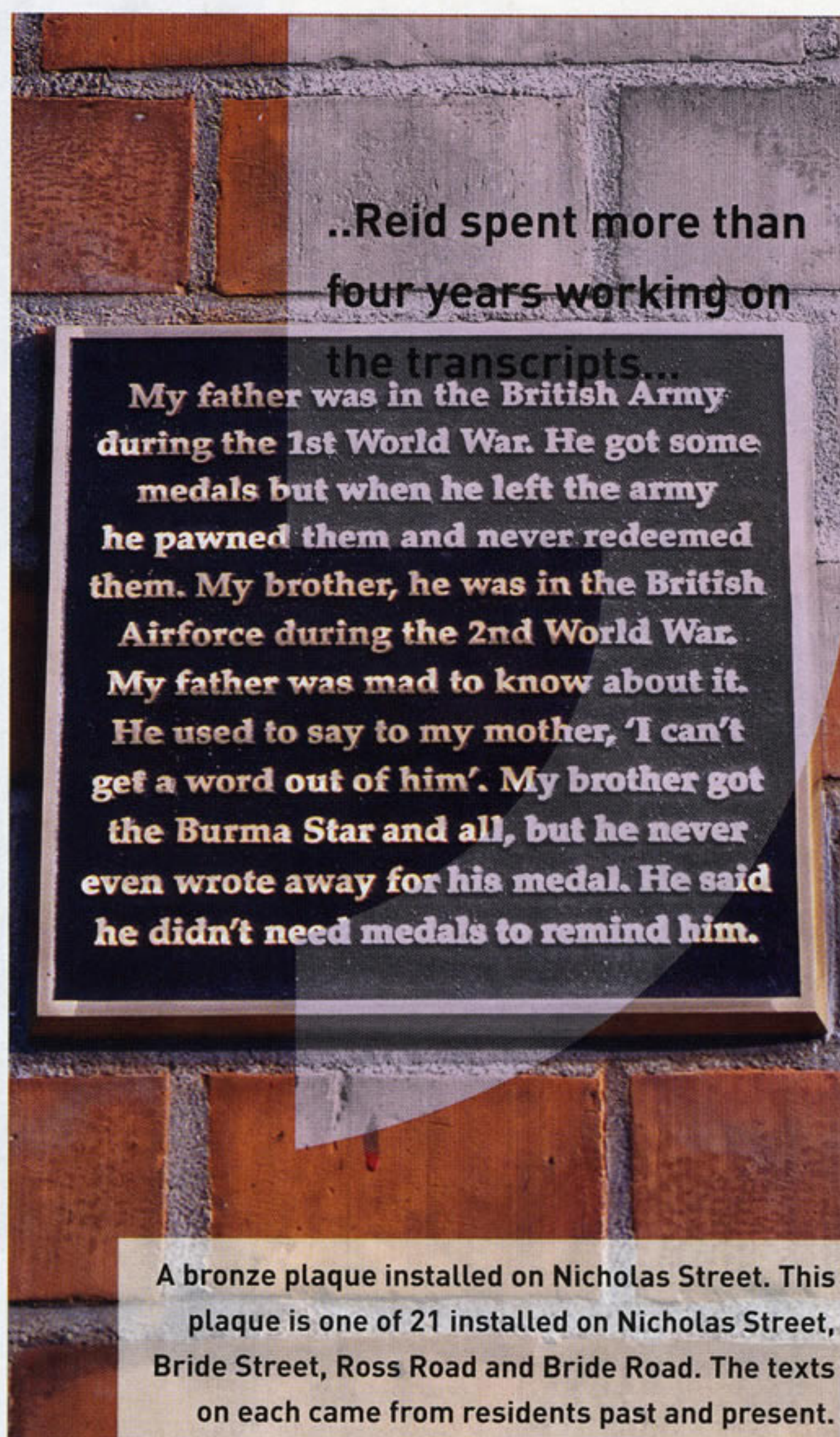
The cover of *Heirlooms & Hand-me-downs*. Photo courtesy of Fergus Redmond.

often ingrained poverty and (what we would today consider) deprivation, people managed to rise above their circumstances and create joy out of very little:

'...All that Ross Road, there must have been about, Jaysus, the best part of 200 to 250 kids on that road playing. Always playing marbles, piggy, your da would be looking for the shoe-polish, it was gone, spin-the-bottle. Beds, hop, hop, hop, you know, and skipping. We were always playing and the kids were happier...'

But there was also very real suffering in the Liberties and this shouldn't be underplayed for the sake of the 'we were poor but happy' myth. There was serious illness - TB, gastritis, and for women, the complications of multiple births as well as rheumatic fever from the damp in the tenements: *'I had been in hospital for two and a half years with rheumatic fever... pains all over your body and it left a strain on your heart... when she got me in (to the hospital), the nuns just took me and dragged me up the stairs and "there's your bed - get into that". And I was screaming for me ma and da and the whole lot.'*

Many people were also coping with the effects of fighting in both world wars, either living with physical injuries, crippling



..Reid spent more than four years working on

the transcripts...

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.

A bronze plaque installed on Nicholas Street. This plaque is one of 21 installed on Nicholas Street, Bride Street, Ross Road and Bride Road. The texts on each came from residents past and present.

depression or undiagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. *'The area is very close to Dublin Castle and to various barracks,'* says Reid. *'People in this area fought in both the war of independence and the Irish civil war. The cost of this participation is evident in their stories; narratives of injury, emotional trauma and silence, rather than glory.'*

The flats were built in 1905, and there was severe overcrowding. Conditions were Dickensian, with a serious lack of decent sanitation (many homes had no indoor toilets until the 80's), but there was also a sense of community that doesn't exist today. People supported each other through the bad times and there was no such thing as a locked door: babies were left out in their prams on the street as respite from the damp, and *'had an eye thrown on them'* by a neighbour.

On the other hand, there was the Church and the shadow it (unintentionally?) caused. Women dying in childbirth, after being instructed by the Parish Priest to carry on having children; the everyday beatings in school; girls living in terror of a pregnancy out of wedlock; boys living in fear of being taken to Artane Industrial School: *'...I seen kids my years being put into Black Marias and being driven to Artane...he would*



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Pictured at the launch of *Heirlooms & Hand-me-downs* are (from left) Marie Redmond, Sean Redmond, Irene Redmond and Fergus Redmond who all appear as children in the photo on the cover of the book, which was taken in the 1940s. Chris Reid, the author, is holding the book in the foreground. Photo by Johnny Banbury.

have been eleven and he is dead now actually... I remember another young fella being dragged screaming by policemen and his mother trying to get him away. He wasn't too bad until his mother started crying, you know, and that upset him. It will never leave my mind...'

Reid spent more than four years working on the transcripts, respectfully editing where it was needed, while at the same time, ensuring the original voices were not lost. This attention to detail, shows: 'This was very much a relational piece,' he explains. 'I had to become close to the people and negotiate the work to allow it to come into being. I encouraged people themselves to change anything they wanted to, so for each plaque, they would have gone through each piece. I wanted it to come from the people themselves.'

It is those small details; the images of women doing their communal washing, children going up to the Bayno (run by the Guinness family, major employers in the area) for the drama lessons, dancing, buns and cocoa and the scrum at the Iveagh Market on a Saturday - that leave the biggest

impression. Or the local characters - tramps like Forty Coats and Bang Bang (who chased the Guinness drays shooting his imaginary gun, and is famous in Dublin lore) and the 'poor Jewman', Flower, a 'small blocky man' who wore a beautiful blossom in his lapel - that resonate so strongly, making this book a living, breathing history and an absolute joy to read.

What impressions was Reid left with after so long immersed in a once tight-knit community? 'People still look out for each other, but as in most areas that strong sense of community spirit has probably diminished,' he admits. 'But, even though they feel the loss, it's still a little more intense here, than in other places.'

But that indefinable thing (neighbours, community, a shared sense of history?) has always drawn people back to the Liberties. 'The irony is that a lot of people who've moved out - even moved abroad - say that they miss the area and still have this strong connection with the place,' says Reid. 'So it has a powerful pull, even though they may have left a couple of generations ago. I feel it is an experience of Ireland - a very urban experience - and, as such, it should be valued.'

· 'Heirlooms & Hand-me-downs' available from all bookshops or direct from Chris Reid at: www.chrisreidartist.com

· The plaques can be read on the walls of flats throughout Nicholas St, Bride St, Bride Rd and the Rosser.