

On the Margins

John Scally, teacher of theology at Trinity College, reflects on the work of journalist Sally Hayden.



In recent years a young Dublin woman has highlighted one group of people who need our help. In 2019 Sally Hayden was named by the prestigious Forbes magazine as one of the thirty most influential people in Europe under thirty.

Hayden had not been an overnight success. At the start of her career in journalism, she juggled writing with working in such glamorous jobs as cocktail waitress and Christmas elf. A new chapter in Hayden's ascent to international prominence came with the publication of her first book the award-winning *My Fourth Time, We Drowned*. Last December it was chosen as Irish book of the year.

Her work in this area began when she was contacted by a migrant on social media. He reached out to 'sister Sally' with an urgent cry for assistance. The book is punctuated with quotes in broken English from others who knew of her and sought her help. The title is taken from one such cry from the heart.

Irish people have responded in powerful and practical ways to the plight of the Ukrainian refugees. However, what Hayden does is remind us of another refugee crisis we have not been as attuned to. This is the generally unheralded story of migrants from North Africa. Between 2014 and 2019 more than 19,000 people drowned in

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the Mediterranean on the route from Libya.

Hayden has spent the last ten years searching for the truths behind this often horrific tale in some of the most desolate spots in the world – a cause that has put her health and indeed her life at risk on occasions. Her repeated acts of radical solidarity with these refugees carried with it the risk of grave repercussions. It is as if her motto is: if you live without making a difference, what difference does it make that you live?

Her goal is to introduce us to real people, allowing them to speak for themselves. She documents a shocking narrative of neglect, betrayal and casual cruelty through the sad stories of migrants from Libya, Sudan, Rwanda, Addis Ababa and beyond.

Hayden believed that if she was not part of the solution she would be part of the problem. She sought a practical response, recognising that those in the court of suffering required specific assistance. She has made it her life's work to draw attention to this crisis so that these refugees will be greeted with trucks filled with food, blankets, medicine and essential supplies.

In her work she holds up a mirror to the international community. What is needed are such measures as curative and preventative medicine, immunisation to children under five, school health programmes, examination of children from head to toe and deworming, laboratory services, ante-natal and post-natal health care, health education programmes, home visitation in villages and follow-up care of patients. Too often they are victims of corruption, bureaucratic intransigence and institutional neglect.

Since I last met Hayden, I have an image of a refugee camp with a young boy running a high fever as he wipes flies from swollen eyes. The boy is dressed in torn rags, a shrapnel wound on the back of his leg. He represents in microcosm the story of much of our apathy to our neighbours.

I can still recall meeting Hayden at the entrance of Trinity College while she was a student there. Every time I enter the front gate and look to my left at the statue of Edmund Burke I think of her. She is a potent reminder of Burke's famous words: 'All that is needed for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.'

Her words are the antidote to lethargy or indifference. As only she could, Sally Hayden gives the world a gentle but clarion call to compassion, concern and above all action. I will never forget Hayden sharing the words of someone who contacted her from Libya: 'There's no food, no water. The children are crying. We are suffering, especially the children. We haven't slept in two days. We are waiting for a miracle. Tell them the people are dying here.'