

## Walking the Border

This year, Refugee Tales will walk for the fifth time. For everybody involved in the project, in whatever way, this is surely a remarkable thing. An idea born in Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, driven by the need to communicate the stories and realities of people held in indefinite detention, has so caught the imagination as to sustain hundreds of miles of collective, cultural, political action. Equally remarkable, surely, is the fact that as the project has developed, so it has engaged readers and campaigners across the world, with people reaching out to Refugee Tales from, to name just a few countries, the US, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Italy, Australia and Poland. As the project has walked, in other words, its call has sounded internationally. Whatever Refugee Tales is and has become – a walk, a call, a community, or as the French might help us to say, a manifestation - people want to join and support it.

The call, at every step, has been for an end to indefinite detention, and the way that call has been made has been by sharing the stories of those who have experienced that terrible system. Those stories have been told in many ways and in many settings, and not least in the past year, when our friends who have experienced detention have spoken in parliament, at meetings across the country, and on the BBC. If you have walked with Refugee Tales in the past couple of years you will know that the project shares stories in two ways in particular. Where there is a need to protect a person's anonymity – as so often there is given the multiple ways in which the person who is detained is rendered vulnerable – the story is a co-production between the person whose story it is and an established writer. Numerous writers have given huge amounts of time and energy to the project over the five years it has walked and everybody involved is hugely grateful for all those acts of commitment. At the same time, as the project has developed and as people have come to trust the space it has

created more and more, so people have come to tell their own stories – people, principally, whose status in the UK has been regularized, These first person narratives will feature in Refugee Tales Volume III, due out from Comma Press in time for this year's walk.

The fact that Refugee Tales is marking its fifth anniversary means that the project must reflect on what has changed. Certainly it could not have been anticipated, when we started planning in the summer of 2014, that we would be walking through such intensely turbulent and troubling times. We did know, as we planned that first walk of 2015, that we would be setting off shortly after a general election. We didn't know, of course, that there would be a second election in 2017, following a profoundly divisive referendum in 2016, that itself echoed a profoundly divisive Presidential election in the United States. We did know, I think, that asylum and immigration would come to the fore of British politics, since the government had outlined its intention in 2012 to use forthcoming immigration acts to create a hostile environment. What we didn't know was that as we walked to call attention to the fact that UK was, as it is still, the only country in Europe that detains people indefinitely under immigration rules, that detention would come increasingly to seem like a defining international issue of our moment. When President Trump ordered the separation of families across detention centres at the US-Mexico border, it became clear that detention was, more than ever, becoming a political default, that as right-wing populism gained sway vulnerable people in all kinds of settings were finding themselves detained.

In ways it wouldn't have been possible to predict when we started out therefore, and in ways we wouldn't have wanted to anticipate, the call for an end to indefinite detention in the UK is more urgent than ever. It is also, it seems true to say, more to the fore in political discussion. Due to the work of many organisations, Refugee Tales very much included, it remains possible that an amendment to the current Immigration Bill

will bring an end to indefinite detention in the UK. This particular parliamentary process might yet be thwarted by the machinations surrounding Brexit, but even so the message is clear: step by step the argument for an end to indefinite detention is being won.

At the same time, even as the argument is being won, there are too many ways in which, as it prepares to walk for the fifth time, the project has to report no change. Five years have gone by and some friends who were caught in the terrible limbo of the hostile environment when we started are still in that position. This is wrong in every way and as we continue to call for an end to indefinite detention, so we also call for the hostility that shapes UK asylum policy to be brought to an immediate end. We are also drawing attention to such terrible periods of waiting in the forthcoming volume. The book opens with 'The Stateless Person's Tale' as told to Abdulrazak Gurnah. In that tale we hear the continuation of 'The Arriver's Tale', told to Abdulrazak in the first volume of *Refugee Tales*. As you might recall, 'The Arriver's Tale' ended with question. 'Do you know what limbo is?' the speaker asks. 'It is the edge of hell.' For the five years that *Refugee Tales* has walked, and as the world has changed around us, the person whose experience was relayed in *The Arriver's Tale* has not been forbidden to work. In 'The Stateless Person's Tale', we hear what those years of enforced worklessness have meant.

Acutely concerned, however, as *Refugee Tales* is, with the realities of detention and post-detention existence, it is also, as our patron Ali Smith has said, a walk towards 'the better imagined'. Each year as we have walked, and as we have sought to provide a context in which people's stories can be safely shared, so we have also tried to create a space in which better thinking and better action can take shape. Our walks have taken us across many terrains. We have walked from Dover to Crawley via Canterbury; from Canterbury to Westminster, from Runnymede to Westminster, and, last year, through

London's East End. We have drawn on the histories of those places, on sites of struggle and of optimism, and as we have walked we have constantly articulated a language of welcome.

This year, as you will have heard, the walk's route goes from Brighton to Hastings. In other words, having taken the project into London and to Parliament in each of the past three years, this year Refugee Tales will walk the border. Here again we want to imagine better. Across the five days of the walk we will hear a series of talks under the heading 'Beyond the Border'. The talks will be given by Bridget Anderson, Lyndsey Stonebridge, Helen Barr, Michael Collyer, and Ali Smith, representing between them Migration Studies, Human Rights Studies, the study of Medieval Literature, Political Geography and, of course, in Ali Smith's case, the fullest expressive potential of the contemporary novel. The purpose of the talks will be to picture human movement and political geography in ways that are not governed by hostility and which do not put people seeking asylum at constant risk. Nobody underestimates this task, of course, but nor do we think that the border cannot be reimagined.

And crucially, of course, an end to indefinite detention is one aspect of that re-imagining. The UK, to repeat, is the only country in Europe that detains people indefinitely under immigration rules. To change that fact will be to make a significant change in the way the border is constructed. This year, as ever, as we make our way along the southern coast of the UK, we will walk in order to better imagine.

David Herd