

Reaching Mithymna: Among the Volunteers and Refugees on Lesbos

Steven Heighton

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Steven Heighton volunteered at a refugee camp, and his memoir *Reaching Mithymna* is an eyewitness account of the Syrian refugee crisis.

In 2015, the fifth year of the Syrian civil war, Heighton volunteered as an aid worker. Within hours of arriving in Mithymna, a city on the small Greek island of Lesbos, he was put to work, dropped in with scant knowledge of who was in charge or what was expected of him. Facts dropped into place only as he discovered them, reflecting the sense of dislocation that dominated life on the island.

Heighton was assigned to unload cold, wet refugees who had just crossed the dangerous strait from Turkey—the first stop on a chain that, with luck, would lead to asylum in a country that needed, and tolerated, large-scale immigration. There was little time for personal interaction. Scenes convey the sense of an endless tide of desperate immigrants, as well as capturing complaining Greeks who faced financial and unemployment burdens of their own.

The book avoids political arguments and easy conclusions in favor of facts and sharp details. One volunteer notes that boats failing to land within a narrow time frame risk tides that propel them onto the open sea; a scrap of paper flutters from departing migrants and bears the farewell, “We thank you.” Sparing but rich portraits of individuals arise, as of a senior aid worker who surveys the mess left behind by humans held overnight without latrines and picks up the waste himself, without comment or a request for help. Such small gestures, alongside occasional acts of rebellion against rules designed to control and deny desperation, vibrate with life.

The volunteer’s memoir *Reaching Mithymna* leaves searing impressions of the Syrian refugee crisis with its unembroidered facts and experiences.

SUSAN WAGGONER (November / December 2020)

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