

Book Review: Charles Taylor and Liberia: Ambition and Atrocity in Africa's Lone Star State

by Blog Admin

November 24, 2012

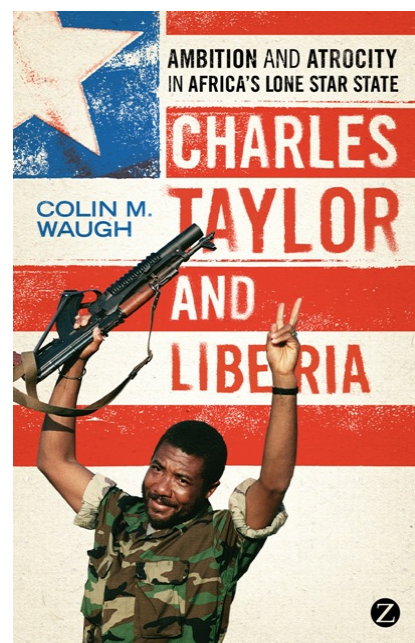
*Charles Taylor sought to lead his native Liberia to change but instead destroyed it in a frenzy of violence, greed and uncontrolled personal ambition. In the process he threw much of Liberia's neighbouring region into turmoil for over a decade, finally facing judgement in The Hague for his role in the Sierra Leone conflict. In this remarkable and eye-opening book, **Colin Waugh** draws on a variety of sources, testimonies and original interviews to recount the story of what really happened during these turbulent years. There can be no easy conclusions, writes **Tara O'Leary**.*



Charles Taylor and Liberia: Ambition and Atrocity in Africa's Lone Star State. Colin M. Waugh. Zed Books. October 2011.

The rise and fall of Charles McArthur Ghankay Taylor – campaigner, insurgent, fugitive, rebel commander, commodity kingpin, elected president, later exiled and finally made prisoner, as he is described in this recent biography by Colin M. Waugh – is a compelling story, one which has the ingredients not only of political biography or recent history, but of the compelling tale of a modern-day fortune-hunter and opportunist.

Born into poverty in a Liberian village in 1948, Charles Taylor worked his way from village school-teacher to President through a mixture of hard graft and brutal pragmatism, the circumstances of which are recounted here as an extraordinary prelude to the story of Taylor's political, military, economic and social impact upon millions of lives in West Africa. Fomenting armed rebellion with the support of a variety of political allies and supportive regimes, Taylor instigated and waged gruesome civil war in Liberia while facilitating further conflict in Sierra Leone. Later democratically elected President of his country in paradoxical circumstances which are insightfully examined by Waugh, Taylor headed an administration which facilitated and relied on a lucrative trade in what are now commonly referred to as 'blood diamonds', before ultimately losing both his presidency and most of Liberian territory to an armed insurgency against his regime. Exile in Nigeria was followed by his surrender to the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), a hybrid international tribunal charged with investigating and prosecuting crimes under international law in relation to the Sierra Leone conflict.



The author, [Colin M. Waugh](#), has a long history of professional and personal involvement in the region, and a sense of affection and respect for Liberia and its people shines through this accessible and readable account of both the improbable events of Taylor's life and the unique circumstances of Liberia, its history and its tragic conflict. Waugh makes a commendable effort to contextualise the effects of generations of discrimination and inequality, and to simplify the complex web of conflicts, armed groups, military alliances, political manoeuvres and financial relationships which converged to create a firestorm of regional conflict in Liberia, Sierra Leone and beyond.

Yet despite the focus of this book, Charles Taylor himself remains somehow absent and remote throughout. The secondary sources used throughout somehow fail to encapsulate his reported charisma

and flair, or to explore this very human story of ambition, greed and corruption. In particular, the story of Taylor's transformation from civil servant and businessman to rebel soldier remains elusive. Other than repeated references to Taylor's overarching urge to power and penchant for opportunism – particularly in relation to gaining the support of other West African leaders, including the provision of military training by the Gaddafi regime, for instance – there is little insight into his decision to adopt arms and pursue a violent solution to the problem of Samuel Doe's disastrous presidency of Liberia. Taylor received his first ever military training – in the Tarjura Libyan military base – at around age 40, yet shortly afterwards found himself successfully leading a military incursion through the Liberian bush that resulted in a takeover of the vast majority of the country. The extraordinary confidence and tenacity this unlikely transformation must have required remain psychologically somewhat unexplored, and Taylor himself feels no closer to the reader at the end of the book than at its beginning.

In this regard, the book suffers from the absence of interviews with Taylor or other forms of direct personal access to him, although this was likely an inevitable consequence of his incarceration and ongoing criminal trial at the SCSL at the time of publication. It is also, perhaps, regrettable in some ways that publication of the book pre-dates the issuing of the verdict in his trial. The judgement, weighing in at a hefty 2,539 pages, provides a historical record and judicial appraisal of many of the events and actions described in the book. Issued in April 2012, the judgement found Taylor guilty of knowingly aiding and abetting rebels in Sierra Leone on 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including murder, rape and other forms of sexual violence, conscription, enlistment or use of child soldiers and enslavement. Some weeks later the Tribunal sentenced him to 50 years imprisonment, noting that while Taylor may have publicly supported peace processes in the region throughout the 1990s, he privately undermined peace negotiations by continuing to support Sierra Leonean rebels – the Revolutionary United Front – through financial, operational, and moral support. This largely corroborates the picture Waugh paints of the devastating impact of Taylor's self-interested opportunism on peace and stability in the region.

The mixed reactions of the Liberian public reported at the time of the verdict demonstrated the paradox by which Taylor was held to account for crimes committed in a neighbouring state but not those perpetrated in his own country or by forces under his direct command. In this respect Waugh raises relevant and justified questions: why was so much time, money and energy spent on investigation and prosecution of crimes under international law committed in Sierra Leone but not those which took place in Liberia? Why was there so little support amongst the international community for the findings and recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia, none of which have been implemented or acted upon? Worth noting, in the interests of disclosure, is some direct criticism of Amnesty International, by whom this reviewer notes she is currently employed in the interests of full disclosure.

Taken in conjunction with somewhat sparse citations throughout, and with a noticeable number of typographical errors, the definitive volume on both Charles Taylor and the Liberian conflict is yet to be written. Yet it is important to remember that his story, his legal proceedings – currently on appeal – and most importantly, Liberia's transition to peace and democracy remain unfinished. There can be no easy conclusions, but pending the final chapter of Taylor's story this is an engaging introduction to the life of a colourful and influential individual, and to a devastating episode of recent history from which much remains to be learnt.

Tara O'Leary graduated from the LSE with an LLM in Public International Law, and works in the fields of international and human rights law. Past positions have included legal adviser and researcher with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Kosovo and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She is currently an assistant legal adviser with Amnesty International. Tara also has an LLB in Law and European Studies from the University of Limerick." [Read more reviews by Tara.](#)

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