

Book review – Burundi: The Biography of a Small African Country by Nigel Watt

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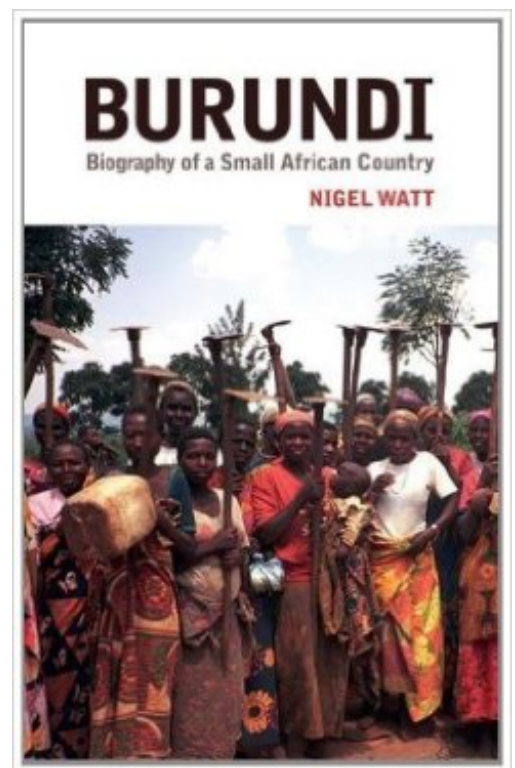
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LSE's Richard Stupart recommends this book to anyone wanting an introduction to the major themes in Burundian politics and history, or an overview of the kinds of organisations involved in conflict resolution, democracy building and development.

To say that Burundi is ignored in the fields of development, political science, and other endeavours focused on Africa is to state the obvious. Compared to the libraries written on Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, or most anywhere else in East Africa, Burundi has suffered what should be a surprising level of neglect and ignorance. Even more so, given a history of major conflict that reaches as far back as the 1970s. When Burundi's electoral crisis came to broader international attention in 2015, the levels of ignorance as to the context of what was happening were in many instances embarrassing.

Burundi: The Biography of a Small African Country is a book that contributes to ending this. Written by Nigel Watt, a former director of London's Africa Centre who compiled and updated this second edition over many years spent traveling to and working in Burundi, it is an entertainingly written sprint through almost fifty years of Burundian history, the dynamics of its conflicts, and its engagement with the international community. It is partly a tale of the life of the country since independence, partly a collection of incredible stories of Burundians trying to end a long history of conflict, and partly an introduction to the landscape of international development organisations in the country. Taken together, it is an excellent entry point for the uninitiated outsider wanting to understand something of the politics and history of this 'small African country'.

Burundi begins with a broad discussion of the early history of the country, setting the political, social and historical context for understanding the path to the country's 2015 crisis over the presidential term extension demanded by president Pierre Nkurunziza. Subsequent chapters provide an overview of major moments of political violence, starting with the widespread massacres of Hutu civilians in 1972, up to the beginning of the violence in 2015 – when the book had, frustratingly, tantalisingly, to go to press and leave the reader to transition to alternative accounts of the last parts of what is essentially a cliffhanger crisis in the text. Such is the nature of trying to write a history 'up to the present' though, and this is no fault of the author. In any event, it is better that the book become available in time to inform those now recently introduced to Burundian politics than that it wait to become a definitive history too late to be of as much practical use.





Road between Bujumbura and Gitega Photo credit: Dave Proffer via Flickr(<http://bit.ly/2kEFTtC>) CC BY 2.0

The book is structured as several short chapters, each explaining different moments of Burundian history and politics, or elements of the different parts of contemporary civil society. In the latter case, chapters on the various faith-based organisations in the country and its media landscape give an account of civic life and politics in the country that is refreshingly broad. Although including the stories of the major political parties and armed actors, it is a book that does not dwell on them exclusively, and provides a good deal of background on the work being done by a range of other sections of Burundian society – often told by various Burundian organisers directly. In a genre of writing all too easily given to leaving out local voices in favour of development ‘experts’, this approach succeeds well and is a practice that this reviewer wishes were more widespread.

This book is a recommended text for anyone wanting an introduction to the major themes in Burundian politics and history, or an overview of the kinds of organisations – both international and local – involved in conflict resolution, democracy building and development. For an outsider heading to the country to work, *Burundi: The Biography of a Small African Country* should be compulsory. For anyone interested in Burundi generally, it is a well written, entertaining overview of a place that too few people know enough about.

[Burundi: The biography of a small African country](#) . Nigel Watt. Hurst. 2008

Richard Stupart ([@wheretheroad](#)) is the Features Editor of African Defence Review and PhD researcher at the LSE. His primary research interests are media representation and humanitarian response, empathy and duty to distant suffering, and mixed research methods. Richard’s work has included reporting on post conflict recovery in northern Uganda, critiques of humanitarian response, and research periods in South Sudan and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. He blogs at [Where the Road Goes](#).

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.