

Lawyer's Bookshelf

Myron Taylor: The Man Nobody Knew

REVIEWED BY
DANIEL KORNSTEIN

By C. Evan Stewart; Twelve
Tables Press, 304 pages, \$26.95.

Biographers tend to focus on famous people, the names we all know, and such focus is understandable. After all, we like to read about our heroes and villains and celebrities of all kinds to learn more about their achievements, foibles, and personal lives.

This book, a biography of someone named Myron Taylor, is different, and thankfully so. It dares to find a new path and is a great biography about someone we never heard of.

The number of important people we have never heard of is, by definition, unknown. Such people do not seek the limelight, are not interested in public attention, and care not for fame.

Rather, they carry out the vital work they do without advertising it or themselves and are content with that accomplishment. They do not need or want publicity. For these rare, emotionally secure people, good work is enough and its own reward.

Myron Taylor (1874-1959) is one such person, which explains the book's subtitle: "The Man Nobody Knew."

Before reading this wonderful new biography of him by Manhattan lawyer/writer C. Evan Stewart, I didn't know who Taylor was. I had never come across his name. Graduates of Cornell Law School probably recognize the name, as the Law School building there is called Myron Taylor Hall. But I suspect few other people would know anything about him. As Stewart points out near the beginning of the book, Taylor once said personal publicity should be limited to "a brief mention of birth, marriage and death."

That is one reason why this biography is so welcome. It fills a void that we didn't know even existed. It teaches us about a life well lived. It lifts a veil on some crucial historical events of the 20th century. It gives pleasure as well as instruction.

But that is not the only reason why this book is so excellent. We learn that much of importance happens that we never know about. We see, once again, how legal training can be a benefit beyond the bounds of law practice. Together, this book and the life of Myron Taylor show the truth and profound wisdom of Balzac's comment: "Are lawyers not, in a way, statesmen charged with private business?"

Taylor's life also demonstrates a different spin on the Balzac quote and asks: "Are statesmen not, in a way, lawyers charged with public business?"

Stewart nicely fills in the blanks with clear, clean prose. He carefully and concisely tells us who Taylor was, what he did, and why we should know about him. And Stewart does so with care and style after years of lonely, daunting archival research. If, like me, you've never heard of Myron Tay-

lor, it is worth looking at his useful and inspiring life.

Like so many other successful people, Taylor came from humble and obscure beginnings. Born in 1874, Taylor and his parents lived in a small town (Lyons) in upstate New York. His father had a leather tannery business. Instead of college, he went straight to law school, studying for one year at the National University Law School (now long gone) in Washington, D.C., and then transferring to Cornell Law School. At Cornell, law student Taylor had the good fortune to have a young Charles Evans Hughes as one of his teachers. Hughes' life of public service, which Taylor admired, became a model for Taylor.

But first Taylor had to establish himself and his financial independence. Stewart tells how Taylor, while practicing small-time law in his small hometown, found an opportunity through litigation to

the conference failed. At FDR's behest, Taylor also met with Winston Churchill at 10 Downing Street. Then, in 1939, after Hitler invaded Poland, FDR named Taylor Ambassador to the Vatican, the first to hold the office since 1867.

At the Vatican, Taylor nurtured a good relationship with Pope Pius XII and tried (unsuccessfully) to keep Mussolini out of the war, muzzle (successfully) Father Charles Coughlin's anti-Semitic radio broadcasts from Detroit, have the Pope push for a mediated peace, and help the persecuted Jews. History has returned a controversial mixed verdict on Pope Pius's efforts in that last task.

Some of the best parts of Stewart's book are his descriptions of extraordinary wartime meetings between the Pope and Nazi foreign minister Von Ribbentrop. We see the German yelling and gesticulating to the Pope and his cardinals about how Germany is so powerful and Hitler so successful that it would be foolhardy to think Germany would not win the war quickly. All these histrionics were designed to stop Pope Pius from trying to push peace efforts.

In July 1944, Taylor helped organize the Bretton Wood Conference that improved foreign exchange. After the war, Taylor was primarily involved in relief efforts for the European peoples who bore the brunt of the horror. No doubt that experience seamlessly had an effect on his great philanthropic efforts.

In telling Taylor's life story, Stewart does a outstanding job. Stewart, an active litigation partner at Cohen & Gresser, spent two decades of his spare time on this project, which he inherited from one of his favorite professors at Cornell Law.

The book itself is unusually attractive as a physical object, with photographs and illustrations helpfully spread throughout the volume at relevant spots rather than grouped together in the middle, as often happens.

This is the first biography of Taylor, which means Stewart had to pull together the different pieces and strands of Taylor's life from many different sources. Stewart's vast research effort is reflected in the many illuminating and helpful footnotes at the end of each chapter. Those footnotes form a running commentary on the text.

One look at those footnotes and the reader understands that Stewart is a dedicated, smooth, and accomplished writer. His probing essays on legal history have graced the pages of the Federal Bar Council Quarterly and other publications for many years. In many ways, this biography is a fascinating slice of U.S. history as refracted through the life of one little known but remarkable American as told by a diligent, impressive, and skillful lawyer/writer.

This is Stewart's first book. We eagerly look forward to reading more books by him and hope we don't have to wait twenty years to do so.

DANIEL KORNSTEIN is a partner at Emery Celli Brinckerhoff Abady Ward & Maazel.



enter the textile business. After selling that business, Taylor in 1921 was called on to quarterback a much-needed corporate refinancing and reorganization of the then-failing Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company—the so-called "Goodyear Rescue." That successful deal led to his being tapped to achieve the merger of Guaranty Trust and the National Bank of Commerce.

By then, Taylor had achieved a reputation for sound business and financing judgment as well as great tact in dealing with people. And the people he impressed were the leading financiers and businessmen in the country, including J.P. Morgan. Soon Taylor found himself sitting on many corporate boards, including U.S. Steel.

Taylor capped his years as an industrialist when he was asked to become Chairman and CEO of U.S. Steel from 1932 to 1938. During those troubled Depression years, Taylor's adroitness and sensitivity in dealing with others, including labor leaders, on difficult issues grew. Taylor's stature in the business world coupled with his skill in managing people caught the attention of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and led to the next, public service phase of Taylor's career.

In 1938, FDR pulled Taylor from the verge of retirement into FDR's own orbit. Even before World War II broke out, he asked Taylor to help with some speechwriting and to convene an international conference in the hope of solving the problem of refugees fleeing Nazi persecution.

Despite Taylor's best efforts,