

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hans Zell and African studies publishers, librarians, and authors

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Introduction

After a brief overview of Hans Zell's publishing output, his own authorship, and that by others he published, I outline and assess his massive contribution to the bibliography and reference works of Africa, to African publishing and knowledge about it, and to associated networks and distribution in the North, as well as forays into the digital realm. In addition, I provide insights into his interaction with African studies librarians in the United States.

I first met Hans Zell in Oxford in the late 1990s, a few years after he published my first book-length bibliography, drawn from my doctoral research (Limb 1993). I was inspired to choose him as publisher as I had honed my critical approach to Africana bibliographies by reviewing a good many of the best works appearing, most often by the Hans Zell imprint, and he had recently published a volume edited by my thesis supervisor and a bibliography by one of my examiners (Etherington 1992; Gertzel 1991). In my career as bibliographer and historian spanning four decades, the name of Hans Zell often would reappear, and both in terms of his own writings and projects as well as those he published, invariably stimulate thought, and inspire action in diverse realms of African studies. As a publisher, he was generous and patient, his outreach to far-off corners of African studies far-sighted.

Prodigious contribution to African publishing and bibliography

Hans Zell's prodigious contribution to African publishing and bibliography in particular and African studies in general for over five decades is evident from his output as author, editor and publisher. He was a trailblazer, founding the *African Book Publishing Record* (ABPR) in 1975, editing it until 2002, was a major player in the African Books Collective (ABC), and secretary to the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa, which I hosted in 1999. This dedication to Africa was rooted in early work in Sierra Leone, then as director of the University of Ife Press. Hans Zell Publishers, launched in Oxford in 1975, had an impact across diverse African Studies fields, most notably literature (for example Chris Dunton, *Make Man Talk True: Nigerian drama in English since 1970* (1992) and reference works and bibliographies. There was an ethical side to business, through representation and distribution of African publishers, including the cutting-edge anti-apartheid Ravan Press, and East African Literature Bureau, and a

cooperative arrangement with James Currey (2000–02). A nurturing quality was evident in publishing on behalf of bodies such as SCOLMA (French 1993), the International African Institute (IAI) and the UN Economic Commission for Africa. Fully 115 titles appeared under the Hans Zell imprint.¹

United States African Studies librarians and Hans Zell

The Africana Librarians Council (affiliated to the African Studies Association (ASA (US)) bestowed its Conover-Porter Award for ‘the most outstanding achievement and excellence in Africana bibliography or reference work’ on nine occasions to Hans Zell titles. These included: Yvette Scheven, *Bibliographies for African Studies 1970–1986* (1988), Carol Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong’o: the making of a rebel: a source book in Kenyan literature and resistance* (1990); Bernth Lindfors, *Black African Literature in English, 1987–91* (1995); and John McIlwaine, *Writings on African Archives* (1996), the latter published for SCOLMA. In 1996, the *Africana Librarians Newsletter* (ALN) editor noted, ‘Of the 13 books that won or shared the award since 1980, eight were either compiled or published by Hans Zell. The frequency with which books under the Zell imprint have been judged outstanding deserves recognition’.²

Zell interacted with librarians via correspondence with ALN, the ALC listserv, and at conferences. He insisted on an ethical, principled approach to acquisitions. In 1991, on behalf of ABC, he criticized a proposed Library of Congress (LC) West African acquisitions office if it continued purchasing African imprints in local currency to sell to libraries, which reduced the ability of African publishers to accrue precious foreign currency and bolster their fragile operations. Zell argued:

LC offices more and more assume the role of a vendor; and there does seem to be something fundamentally wrong with this concept. From ABC’s perspective, the net result will be that the American taxpayer will subsidise libraries to give lower returns to African publishers. This sits ill with . . . the commitment of many individual librarians to support African publishing.³

In 1996, Zell again wrote to ALN criticizing LC acquisitions, articulating views expressed at a Harare workshop for African journal editors and publishers he had conducted; several ‘protested that this is an unfair method to subscribe to their journals’. ALC continued to debate the matter for the next decade or so. Some librarians resisted Zell’s principled stand but others, including myself, continued to support it.⁴ In response to persistent calls by Zell and his successor at ABC, Mary Jay, the LC East African office director in the 2000s conceded they could purchase African

¹ This paragraph draws on ‘A Short History of Hans Zell Publishing’, <https://www.hanszell.co.uk/history.htm>

² *Africana Librarians Newsletter* 87/88 July/October 1996, p. 8. The 2024 winner was this journal. See: <https://guides.library.upenn.edu/AfricanaLibrariansCouncil/ConoverPorterAward>

³ Letter of H. Zell, ALN 68 October 1991: 9–10. I saw such operations at the Zimbabwe Book Fair in 2001 when negotiating with African publishers on a new pilot scheme to assist publishers to go online.

⁴ H. Zell letter to the editor and editor’s comments: ‘African Journals and LC Nairobi’, ALN 87/88 July/October 1996; ‘Executive Meeting’, November 1996, ALN 89 January 1997.

imprints in US dollars. If some librarians criticized such interventions they remained appreciative of Zell's prodigious output.

There were other kinds of interactions. In 1991 Zell was asked to give advice on and help forward the papers of the late distinguished American Africanist Gwendolyn Carter. That year he exhibited at the American Library Association conference, introduced ABC's new card service at ALC, and represented publishers of bibliographies at an ASA panel. The following year at ALC, he raised a query on behalf of the IAI concerning the market for a cumulative index of its journal *Africa*.⁵

Change and continuity

When the internet was still young, and librarians, publishers and scholars alike were feeling their way around it, Hans Zell published in 1998 *The Electronic African Bookworm*, to guide those in Africa. He would deftly navigate the onrush of the digital age, publishing online other helpful web companions. He grappled with thorny issues around print and digital access (Zell 2020a). In the mid-1990s, he relocated to Lochcarron in the Scottish Highlands. If the new millennium saw a sort of retirement, he continued to publish and write. Hans Zell Publishing continued, if on a smaller scale, with five new works up to 2008, and thereafter numerous essays, including his annual literature review of publishing (2020b), and others, for instance on publishing in African languages (2018). With an eye to the future, he generously donated his African studies and publishing collections to the Jesuit Historical Institute Library in Nairobi and Kwara State University Library. As the golden age of Africanist bibliography ended, he found ways to keep the flickering candle of bibliography alive in *ABPR*, on innovative websites, and in his writings, including in this journal. A biographical synopsis of women in African publishing as well as a bleak analysis of the state of Nigerian university presses appeared in 2022. In 2024 a new edition of *Publishing and Book Culture in Africa: A Repository of Selected Resources* appeared, as did an inventory of African literary journals and 'little magazines'.

The name Hans Zell has rung out for six decades among African studies scholars, librarians, bibliographers, and publishers. His contribution to Africanist publishing, librarianship, bibliography, and reference is immense, diverse, deep in scale, and generous and principled in approach. Whilst the bibliographies and reference works he published seemed expensive to some they were sturdy and par for the field, whereas their length, breadth, and indexing laid a solid foundation for future research. He helped many publishers and authors find an audience and a voice, and it is entirely fitting that *ABRD* marks this distinguished career with a *Festschrift*. Yet, as a new generation of African studies librarians, archivists, publishers, and scholars feel their way, who will help give them a similar forum?

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⁵ ALC Archives-Libraries Committee Minutes April 1991, *ALN* 67 August 1991; ALC Business Meeting Minutes, November 1991 (*ALN* 69 January 1992) and November 1992 (*ALN* 73 1993, 5–6).

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