

H-Net Reviews

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Hans Zell, ed. *The African Studies Companion: A Guide to Information Sources*. Loch Carron: Hans Zell Publishing, 2003. xxiii + 545 pp. No price listed (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9541029-1-3.

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Bibliographies are often taken for granted by academic writers. They provide the scaffolding of much scholarship and generally act as a catalyst of research without proper recognition. The starting point of intensive intellectual exploration is often a well-devised bibliography. Hans Zell has, over many years, developed a superlative reputation for publishing indispensable manuals on African sources that have sponsored original work in this field. Most of them are bibliographies, and this third, revised edition of *The African Studies Companion* is no exception. It is a veritable encyclopedia of knowledge on Africa.

It is a handy reference which maps the rich literature on continental writing, commanding a formidable array of published material and demonstrating years of familiarity with the complexity of Africa, its authors, contexts and challenges. This volume is also the first to be simultaneously available online as part of the cost of the print version. The electronic version has the advantage of being updated regularly, thus making it more current, but the book has the virtue of providing a ready reference to historians, librarians and political scientists, as well as literary and cultural studies' practitioners who seek a quick point of entry to African Studies.

Most of all, *The African Studies Companion* provides an annotated guide to published research on Africa. The commentary offers a thumbnail index, which allows judicious sifting of sources. It therefore acts as a discriminating tool in accessing material on specific topics under the rather encompassing rubric of "African Studies," which itself is rather daunting in its colonial construction. One is struck by how "African Studies" itself remains a captive of a rather dated "colonial" view of the continent. Hans

Zell is, of course, aware of this scholarly imprisonment and tries through diligent and comprehensive referencing to overcome the limitations of an amorphous and undifferentiated construction of "Africa." He covers a wide range of topics, a panoply of regions and a stellar range of sources, including journals, newspapers, archives and film collections. The five-hundred-odd pages open up a "world" of possibilities for research on the tortured and often under-represented history of Africa in globalized discourses. It is perhaps curious, however, that "African Studies" remains continentally described, without enough consideration of regional specificity or cultural diversity. The time may have come when "companions" of this kind need to be more focused on areas of Africa, thus deconstructing older notions of the continent, presenting a more attenuated interpretation of the identities that span its deserts, plains and villages.

The volume is organized into twenty-three sections, providing a huge body of references, including a vast inventory of electronic sources derived from the Worldwide Web. Each source is evaluated and ranked in terms of its usefulness, thus offering a qualitative entree to topics in African Studies. Another valuable feature is the inclusion of references to reviews, which chart debates in the field and indicate trends in recent scholarship. Biographical and cartographical sources also fill these pages, adding to the information about videos, discussion forums and sites of news about Africa. The approach is entirely up-to-date, the contents completely relevant and the estimations profoundly defensible. The overall impression is therefore of an accomplished, carefully conceived and expertly executed reference work which should be on the shelves of every serious African Studies specialist.

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