

IN MEMORIAM

Herman Bell (1933-2023)

Professor Walter Herman Bell, a long-standing and greatly treasured member of the UNGEGN community for more than twenty years, sadly passed away on February 7th, 2023, just one month shy of his ninetieth birthday.

Professor Bell – simply “Herman” to all his colleagues – was born on March 10th 1933 in Richmond, Virginia. His father, Walter Herman Bell Sr., was a professor of French. After graduating with a B.A. in History & French from Davidson College, North Carolina, in 1953, the young Herman became an Academic Guest at the German Academy of Sciences in Berlin for two years, studying Egyptology, before moving to the United Kingdom in 1956. He was awarded a Junior Research Fellowship at University College, University of Oxford, gaining an M.Litt. in Ancient Egyptian & Coptic in 1962. In the period between these achievements, Herman married Ann Farrer in 1959. The couple moved to the United States in 1965, where Herman added further degrees to his name: an M.A. in Linguistics (African Languages and History) in 1966 and a doctorate in Nubian Toponymy in 1968, both awarded by Northwestern University in Illinois.

Herman’s gravitation towards the languages of Africa is evidenced by these later degrees, and it was the Nubian world in Sudan and Egypt that particularly captured his attention. He received a travel grant from University College for a Survey of Nubian Place Names at the time of the construction of the Aswan Dam, which led to the flooding of Nubian homelands. Between 1962 and 1964, he and Ann travelled extensively through Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia. In 1968, Herman gained his first academic position, as Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. There, Herman was quick to make his name in toponymic circles with his 1970 authorship of the magnificently-titled *Place Names in the Belly of Stones*, the first study of toponyms in a sparsely inhabited stretch of the Sudanese Nile.

In 1973, Herman moved to the University of Khartoum, where he stayed for the remainder of the 1970s, first as reader, then as professor at the Institute of African & Asian Studies. In 1980, he moved to a professorial position in the Department of Foreign Languages of King Faisal University in Saudi Arabia. Returning in 1993 to the UK, Herman became Dean of Academic Affairs at the Oxford Academy for Advanced Studies (until 2003), and in the years since 2000 he had been an Honorary Fellow in the Institute of Arab & Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter.

It was in the year 2000 that Herman first became involved with UNGEGN, representing Sudan by virtue of his role as Consultant to the Sudan National Committee for Geographical Names. He attended UNGEGN sessions on behalf of Sudan in 2000 and 2004, as well as the 8th UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, held in Berlin in 2002. Relinquishing this official role in 2007, Herman became an independent member of the UNGEGN Working Group on Exonyms, attending and contributing to all seven of its meetings between 2010 and 2018. His writings during this period were very much focused on Nubian issues, with articles such as *Nubian Perceptions of Exonyms and Endonyms* (2012), and *Toponymic Teleology: Endonyms in an Endangered Language* (2013), both subsequently published in the *Name & Place* series, devoted to documenting toponymic literature and research.

Herman also contributed to the Nubian studies journal *Dotawo*, in particular an article titled *Endangered Toponymy along the Nubian Nile*, which he co-authored with his late friend and colleague Halim Sabbar, himself briefly a figure in the UNGEGN Working Group on Exonyms until his untimely death in 2017.

Herman had since the 1960s been distressed by the effects on the Nubian people of the construction of the Nile dams, works of engineering which had seen riverine Nubians forced to vacate their traditional villages and move to newly constructed settlements, some of which were elsewhere in Sudan, where they were “named” solely by means of numbers, and others which were in Egypt. He lamented this destruction of culture, and remained committed to preserving and promoting the Nubian cause right through into his eighties, lecturing on Nubian culture and heritage in Khartoum in 2018. Even as recently as 2019, at the age of 86, Herman recorded a short Facebook clip in which he expressed very movingly his love for the people.

Within UNGEGN, of course, Herman is known for his toponymic contributions, but it is important to acknowledge his many other interests as well. Perhaps foremost among these was education; Herman recognised that a widespread dissemination of knowledge was key to fostering a better understanding of cultures and peoples. He was especially keen to promote the education of women, acting since 2003 as a trustee of the Women's Education Partnership, a charity offering scholarships to women from war zones. And, as with toponymy, Herman was undaunted by the prospect of helping to further the cause of education right through into his eighties. Aged 81, he attended a 2014 Leadership Workshop on the subject in Tripoli, Libya – this during a civil war – and later in the same year participated in a demanding fortnight of lectures on higher education, linguistics and toponymy at Ahmeti Yesevi University in Kazakhstan.

Herman was a man blessed with great kindness and a true generosity of spirit. He would see the best in people. And although he embodied a phenomenal breadth of knowledge and experience, he always wore these attributes lightly and disseminated them freely and widely. One could absorb wisdom from him almost effortlessly, simply by joining him at a mealtime or on an excursion. All of us in UNGEGN have lost a colleague of rare qualities, and we shall miss him greatly.

Herman is survived by his wife Ann, and by their daughter Bethany and their son Jordan.

Paul Woodman



Herman Bell, 2014 (photo M. Zych)