

DILI WORLD PREMIER LAUNCH OF JEMMA PURDEY'S
From Vienna to Yogyakarta: the life of Herb Feith
Dili, Timor-Leste, 30 June 2011

1. The launch was held in the evening at the Balide Comarca, the former colonial prison in Dili, now the national office of the Post-CAVR Secretariat. About 50 people attended including East Timorese, participants from the Timor-Leste Studies Association conference that started in Dili that day, and internationals working in Dili. Nibbles, juice and Portuguese wine were served. Two other launches were also conducted. John Waddingham launched the CHART (Clearing House for Archival Records on Timor) Project, and Pat Walsh, who launched Jemma's biography, also launched two CAVR public hearing books, on Self-Determination and the Internal Political Conflict 1974-76, respectively. All five copies of Jemma's book were sold, including one to the CAVR library where it will join the many books donated by Betty and her children following Herb's death. Following are some points from Pat's talk.
2. Pat started by quoting from the invitation circulated in Dili in November 2001 following Herb's death. The invitation invited people to a memorial to '*celebrate the life of a wonderful, saintly, generous, eccentric, brilliant, humble man and his contribution to Indonesia and East Timor*'. Pat said it was impossible to do justice in 15 minutes to a man with these qualities and that it had taken Jemma over 500 pages. He recalled that Kirsty Sword Gusmao and Xanana Gusmao both spoke at the 2001 memorial which was held at the Xanana Gusmao reading room. He said Jemma's book was a beautiful piece of work about a person described by Dewi Anggraeni as '*a rare human being*'. He said the book rang true to the Herb he knew and loved and he understood that Herb's wife Betty and colleagues like George Hicks also loved the book. He then described the circumstances of Herb's death as told by Jemma at the end of the biography.
3. Pat said a life like Herb's is like a diamond with many beautiful aspects and that Jemma's book captured these. He particularly enjoyed learning more about Herb and his interests: that he was using a favourite word like 'beaut' early in his life though its not found in political science lexicons, that he learned the violin and played with Bondan in Indonesia, played tennis, exhausted himself by doing too much even early in his life (recalling Herb's habit of taking a snooze on the floor at the ACFOA office in Fitzroy), how long he'd known Betty (since they were both about 16), that Soejatmoko (Galuh Wandita's dad) was an early important influence, the influence of his Jewish origins in Nazi occupied Vienna on his attitudes and lifelong preoccupations with democracy, peace, international collaboration, refugees, totalitarianism, his shock at the poverty he witnessed in Indonesia, the striking similarities between Herb's early years in Indonesia and working in Timor-Leste post-independence, his mother's worries that he would convert to Christianity (reminiscent of current concerns in Dili about Timorese studying in Cuba) and the lightness of his footprint both in environmental terms (his famous bike, which was featured at his memorial service in Yogya) and his gentleness with people and reluctance to preach. To illustrate Herb and Betty's style, he showed the audience texts of fax letters sent by Herb and Betty from Bulak Sumur in Yogya – the letters had no paragraphs and the slimmest of margins but sparkled with news, comment and enthusiasm.
4. He then spoke briefly about Herb the engaged scholar. He held up a copy of Herb's magnum opus '*The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*', published by Cornell in 1962 and reprinted 4 times (Herb's own copy given to the CAVR library by Betty and the family after Herb's death). He said he did not want to say that democracy would fail in Timor-Leste but that Indonesia's experience, as documented by Herb, contained important experiences. He

then said that in addition to being a scholar Herb was committed to sharing knowledge as a teacher. He quoted from a letter he received from Herb in Yogya in June 99 in which Herb said he had had his last classes that week and was sad there'd be no teaching for over 3 months. He then said Herb was more than a teacher content only to impart information and ideas. He was also a guru in the sense that he had the ability to enthuse and inspire and had influenced a generation of young scholars to be engaged academics, in a way probably not matched by other eminent contemporary Indonesianists. His example in volunteering and serving in Indonesia not only exemplified the two great themes of his life, peace and international collaboration, but also inspired generations of Australians to follow suit through the AVI program, a contribution and legacy honoured with a life membership by AVI in 2001. Herb's work for change, however, did not distort his scholarship. Pat quoted Goenawan Mohammad's comment on Herb from II No 70, 2002: *'I think I know Herb: he really tried not to let his analysis drown in his own sensitivity towards what is just and unjust, cruel and not cruel: but he would never just fold his hands to do nothing'*. To exemplify Herb's passionate side, he quoted a recollection of Helen Hill (who was in the audience) recorded in the same edition of II about Herb urging his audience at a graduation ceremony at Monash to join a Vietnam Moratorium march the next day, to the dismay of the Vice-Chancellor but the delight of the students.

5. Pat said he worked most closely with Herb during the 80s and 90s. He recalled visits to Herb and Betty's spartan residence in Glen Iris, Herb's many visits to 124 Napier St and his memorable exits as he plunged sideways down the wooden stairs, bulging briefcase under his arm, bidding an enthusiastic farewell to those at the top. He also told of Herb's deep interest in and support for projects he was involved with over many years such as Inside Indonesia magazine, sensitive human rights issues such as Burma, Sri Lanka, East Timor and Indonesia that few others associated with, his interest in institutional initiatives such as a human rights centre and the personal support he extended to the ACFOA Human Rights Office and its staff including Marc Purcell, Sharmini Sherrard, Denis Nichols, Soe Soe, John Ball, Emma Baulch, and Vanessa Johanson. He described Herb's support for a non-violent UN based solution to the Timor issue and noted that this interest started back in the 70s, was carried out despite substantial reservations on the part of the Australian and Indonesian governments and some of Herb's eminent colleagues, and involved important and thoughtful contributions to the 1982 Senate Inquiry, extensive networking, essays and publications, lending his name and support to the East Timor Talks Campaign and observing the Popular Consultation of August 99, as recounted in Jemma's biography. He noted that the Indonesian military used the Comarca Balide, the site of this book launch, to repress many of the ideas Herb was dedicated to. Now, through the grant of his library to CAVR, his books continue to work silently for these projects.

6. Lastly Pat commented on Herb's spirituality. He quoted Herb saying (II 2002) that he was a syncretist Jew (Yahudi abangan) who admired Gandhi who'd said: 'I am a Hindu, and a Muslim, and Christian, and a Sikh, and a Parsi and a Jew'. He displayed a copy of *Alive to God*, a book of prayers (photocopied and bound in Yogya) which Herb had given him and pointed out all the sources it drew on, including Muslim and non-believer sources. His was the spirituality of a deeply thoughtful man who was reluctant to embrace a single system of thought and belief, and who, besides being a teacher, was a student who listened and was open to all wisdom.