

**From Vienna to** Yogyakarta: The Life of Herb Feith

By Jemma Purdey

UNSW Press, 592pp, \$69.95

JEMMA Purdey's biography of Herb Feith (1930-2001) appears in the year we have farewelled two prominent Indonesianists: Murray Clapham and Jamie Mackie, both of whom found their way to Jakarta thanks to Feith's pioneering work in establishing the Volunteer Graduate Scheme in Indonesia in the 1950s.

We are losing the generation whose commitment to Indonesia has been pivotal to the way we understand our neighbour and engage with its people.

Let's hope that this biography inspires others to explore the archipelago with open minds and hearts. Purdey had a lot of material to work with. It must have been intimidating to sift through all the letters and notes Feith left behind (most of her footnotes refer to his writings). She also had to put these in context. Sometimes she does so with a didactic interlude describing the events of the time; elsewhere, she is able to interweave Feith's personal connection with the history she recounts.

Purdey's writing flows. On occasion, she seems swept up in the mood swings of her subject: for example, when she explores Feith's writer's block and depression, her own prose loses its tightness. Reflecting on Feith invites consideration of the role of the public intellectual in Australian life and as a commentator on Indonesia more particularly.

For a reader such as me, who has had connections with the world Purdey describes, this story is familiar, though it offers new insights into the man and rightly airs the quandary Feith faced throughout his life as a scholar-activist. That was a bigger tension and journey than the one the book's title conveys.

Yes, Feith came from a Jewish refugee family who fled Vienna in 1939 and for whom the oppression of minorities and authoritarianism had personal echoes.

But it was less these than the dilemma between observing a situation and doing something to improve it that tested his intellectual approach, contributing to the bouts of despondency that plagued him. And while his mother, Lily, was disturbed by his embrace of Christianity, Purdey's account suggests that for Feith himself this caused little angst. His steadfast humanism overcame ecumenical differences.

What is not clear from the book is Feith's attitude towards Islam. He was close to many liberal Muslims in Indonesia but we do not hear of any commentary on the Islamic faith.

Observers of Indonesia during the New Order (1966-98) had to tread carefully if they wanted to maintain their connections. Indonesian commentators became adept at self-censorship and the double entendre. Jakarta was an exciting place to be, not least because of the riddles and rumours that were an analyst's raw material.

Foreigners, too, had to think about what they said publicly and whether they wanted to risk being banned from returning. This could result in what Feith called "visa cowardice", something he debated with his fellow academics.

His decision to be critical -- for example, he wrote an open letter condemning Indonesia's treatment of political prisoners during president Suharto's one visit to Australia -- did him no favours in official circles in Jakarta.

Feith's critique went further. Under the influence of radical theologian Ivan Illich he came to view those who praised Indonesia's economic progress as apologists for the regime. This was a shift to the left for Feith (he had been no champion of Sukarno), which took him in the 70s and 80s away from Indonesia to greater participation in the anti-nuclear movement and to championing global peace studies.

This orientation led him to conclude that the tiny half-island of East Timor could survive as an independent state, though for some time, influenced by his deep understanding of Indonesian attitudes and history, he was more inclined to the province assuming a form of special status within Indonesia.

As with the 1965 attempted coup and mass killings that followed, so with East Timor, Feith tried to use his intellect as well as his moral compass to guide his responses. This resulted in painful rifts with some of his closest friends, notably US scholar Ben Anderson and for some time Mackie, inter alia foundation professor in the department of political and social change at the Australian National University's research school of Pacific and Asian studies.

Purdey concludes that Feith's model of scholarly engagement, with its constant grappling between ethics and science, is one worth striving for. This is a stretch too far. Feith's best academic work emerged from immersion in his subject matter, keen observation and critical narrative. His least productive years, as Purdey recounts them, are those when he tried to force what he saw and knew into a theoretical construct.

In the end, the analyst came second to the archivist and educator. Feith's legacy was to initiate and support throughout his life deep personal engagement with Indonesia.

Thanks in great part to him, new generations of students are able to work in villages or offices or classrooms alongside their Indonesian colleagues. With the decline in support for Indonesian studies in

many Australian universities they are less assured of the opportunity to return to an academic milieu where they can make sense of that experience.  
At least they can now read about the man who paved their way.

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>> Francesca Beddie was a diplomat in Indonesia in the 1980s. For a couple of months in 1997 she lived down the road from Herb Feith in Yogyakarta.

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