



Molly and Bondan, Jakarta, 1963

Photo from Ivan Southall, *Indonesia Face to Face*
(Melbourne: Lansdown Press, 1964)

MOLLY BONDAN: 1912–1990

George McT. Kahin

Molly Bondan, one of the most effective, but modest and unobtrusive, foreigners who worked in support of the Indonesian revolution and later to help realize its promises, died in Jakarta, following a two-year ordeal with cancer, on January 6, 1990. A model of selfless devotion to Indonesia's welfare and disciplined hard work on its behalf, she never completely lost the idealism that sustained her—even in the period of disappointment that set in for her within a decade of the country's independence.

Though later naturalized an Indonesian citizen, Molly was born Mary Alithea Warner on January 9, 1912 in Auckland, New Zealand. Her father, Edward Warner, and her mother, Maud Martin, had emigrated to Australia and New Zealand from England. Molly's parents were both active in the Theosophical Society, and she graduated from an experimental high school in Australia connected with that organization in 1928. She then went to work in the office of her father, a designer and illustrator of catalogues and posters, who was at the same time a fine painter and etcher of Australian bush and rural society. She subsequently held a variety of mostly clerical jobs, ending up as a company secretary.

But this rather quiet and uneventful life was fundamentally changed by Indonesia's revolution. Her interest in Indonesia had already been kindled by her sympathy with the plight of Indonesian nationalists interned in Australia during the war. When the Australian government finally released them from detention in the fall of 1945, these Indonesians promptly established Cenkim, the Central Committee for Indonesian Independence, on September 22, 1945. Molly volunteered to work with the Committee's Brisbane office, and there met its principal officer, Mohammad Bondan, whom she married a year later. Bondan, a gentle, soft-spoken, but dedicated nationalist from West Java, was a friend and follower of Mohammad Hatta and had been arrested by the Dutch in 1933, two years later being sent, together with Hatta, to the notorious concentration camp of Tanah Merah in Boven Digul deep in the interior of western New Guinea. Hatta, along with Sutan Sjahrir, was fortunate enough to be moved, within a year, to the much healthier climate of Banda, but Bondan was among those obliged to stay on in this fever-ridden, physically debilitating camp for a full eight years. In mid-1943, in the face of the penetration of the Japanese forces into the interior of New Guinea the Dutch, fearing that some of the bitter Indonesian nationalists at Boven Digul might cooperate with the Japanese, moved them to Australia.

After two years working hard and effectively to make Cenkim a more efficient organization, Molly and Bondan, together with other previously interned Indonesian nationalists, were permitted and assisted by the Australian government to move to the Republic of Indonesia. This was not, of course, without strong protest from the Dutch authorities, among many of whom there was a tendency to refer to all these ex-Digul nationalists as ipso facto Communists, despite the fact that only a small minority of them had been members of the Indonesian Communist Party. Symptomatic of this Dutch delusion was the experience of Molly and Bondan in 1947 when, finally en route to the Republic's capital in Yogyakarta, they were put under arrest for ten days in Surabaya by Dutch officials, who in searching their luggage discovered a record of Stravinsky's music, this Russian connection being regarded as evidence of their "Communist" leanings.

Laughable as this may have seemed, it was consistent with the Dutch effort during this period to convince the world that those who led the Indonesian Republic were either pro-Communist or dupes of the Communists. This was made very clear to me just a year later in 1948 when I first heard of Molly Bondan. Upon learning that I'd finally gotten Dutch permission to cross the military status quo line into the Republic, the rather disapproving political officer of the American Consulate General in Batavia, Glen Abbey, asked me to come to his office for a political briefing. There he sternly warned me of the many perils I would face in the Republic. Overall his views were a startling revelation of the appallingly poor American intelligence at this diplomatic post and how heavily warped it had become by the disinformation campaign the Dutch had mounted. Paramount among those people I should be on guard against, he said, was an Australian revolutionary who was "the brains behind the Indonesian Communist party"—a woman named Molly Bondan! On the basis even of what little I then knew I couldn't help feeling considerable skepticism at Abbey's generally dramatic account; which portrayed Molly Bondan as something of a modern-day Mata Hari. In fact, except for her ardent commitment to Indonesian independence, her strong humanitarian compassion and concern for social justice, Molly would always strike me as largely apolitical, with a socio-economic orientation close to that of Bondan and his old mentor Mohammad Hatta.

When they arrived in Yogyakarta in 1947, Bondan called on Hatta, now Vice President of the Republic, and was promptly assigned to the Labor Ministry where Hatta knew his pre-Digul experience would be valuable in setting up and running a division for training industrial workers. Molly was placed in a double-barrelled job in Radio Republik Indonesia and in the Foreign Affairs Section of the Ministry of Information. It was while she and Bondan occupied these positions that I first met them in Yogyakarta in mid-1948. There was a knock at the door of the guest house at Jalan Terban Taman 8a and there they stood, Molly clasping her baby son Alit in her arms. "Since except for Father Zoetmulder you're the only other Westerner in Yogya," she said, "I thought we should become acquainted." I replied that I'd been looking forward to meeting the "reincarnation of Mata Hari," and she and Bondan broke into delighted laughter. An enduring friendship had begun.

Molly and Bondan worked on in the Republican capital until the Dutch attack of December 19, 1948, and following the transfer of sovereignty at the end of 1949 they moved to Jakarta to work with Indonesia's government there. Bondan remained with the Ministry of Labor and Molly was soon transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There she won acclaim for her work during the Asian African (Bandung) Conference in 1955 when with very little sleep she coped with a host of minor problems which if not dealt with effectively could easily have become major. Together with Tom Atkinson, she was one of the two principal translators in the Ministry, and in 1961, when Atkinson returned to England she

succeeded him as English speech writer for President Sukarno until his ouster from power in early 1966. In that capacity she conscientiously strove to translate Sukarno's ideas into English as clearly as possible, rendering them with fine nuance and great accuracy. She continued in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs until she reached pensioned retirement in 1968.

But Molly's retirement was pro forma. She continued to work as hard as ever, launching with Bondan's help a monthly series—*Indonesian Current Affairs Translation Service Bulletin*, which she typed and stenciled herself. This English-language coverage of judiciously selected highlights from Indonesian periodicals was sufficiently valuable to be subscribed to by numerous libraries scattered around the world. The *Bulletin* was published from 1968 to 1976, when Bondan's deteriorating health obliged them to give up this work. Molly continued with ad hoc assignments from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Information, in the process editing several books on the arts of Indonesia of which perhaps the most attractive was one, with her text, highlighting an especially beautiful collection of colored photographs of Javanese temples, *Candi in Central Java, Indonesia*, published by the provincial government of Central Java in 1982. Her last major assignment with the government commenced in 1988 when she helped organize exhibits for the "Festival of Indonesia." She had hoped it might be possible for her to visit the United States for the festival's opening in Washington in September of this year.

During Bondan's last years, Molly spent much of her time helping him write his biography; and when he died on February 6, 1981, she continued this work. Though many of Molly's friends urged her to write her own biography she remained adamant in insisting this would have to wait until after she completed Bondan's. This she managed to accomplish only in the last days before her death,¹ and it will be up to some of her many friends to undertake the story of her own life.

¹Bondan's biography is scheduled to be published soon by Pustaka Sinar Harapan under the title, *Spanning a Revolution*.

