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## Tribute to 'best orchid specialist in the world' at launch of Journal

**Kan Yaw Chong**

KOTA KINABALU: Plenty of good words such as "the best orchid specialist in the world" were attributed to prolific orchid writer the late Peter O'Byrne during the launch of Malesian Orchid Journal Vol. 23 (2019) at the Kinabalu Hyatt Regency Friday morning officiated by Guest of Honour Tan Jiew Hoe.

In the words of orchid guru Datuk Tony Lamb, "Peter's knowledge on orchids is huge, very, very good taxonomically, very detailed and accurate in botanical drawing."

Peter died suddenly on August 11 in London just as he was about to return to his second home Kota Kinabalu.

His death is seen as a "serious setback" to future taxonomic efforts with no replacement of such exceptional orchid talents in sight.

Wife Judy O'Byrne and first daughter Jenna were on hand to hear the raft of good stories about Peter from Tan, publisher Datuk CL Chan, tropical botanist Dr Ruth Kiew of Forest Research Institute Malaysia, Ong Poh Teck, also from FRIM, Linus Gokusing and Dr. Steven Busuang, besides stirring tributes of their own.

"Easily the most active orchidologist in Southeast Asia and Borneo," Tan assessed the adverse impact of Peter's "untimely demise".

"Taxonomists are a rare breed. As we gather for this launching, we recall the contributions of two of the very best taxonomists we have had for addressing the spectacular diversity of orchids in Borneo. Unfortunately, we lost both of them within five months."

"Peter was one of the most outspoken persons I have known, and with his intimate knowledge and dedicated scholarship, he published many novel orchid, particularly from Sabah and Borneo in the last 20 issues of Malesian Orchids Journal," Tan added.

With Peter's demise and that of first Editor of Malesian Nature Journal, Jeff Wood, who also died shortly after Peter's death, "we now have a serious setback in that orchids of Southeast Asia, which require dedicated specialist attention, now we see a vastly reduced taxonomic effort. Their deaths have left a near vacuum now in the



(From left) Dr. Ruth Kiew, Judy O'Byrne, Tan Jiew Ho, Datuk C.L. Chan, Dr. Steven Busuang, Jenna O'Byrne, Ong Poh Teck and Linus Gokusing.

study of Borneo orchids," Tan lamented.

Likewise, Chan said Peter was "a highly motivated and productive orchid specialist with a superb knowledge of the orchid flora of not only Borneo but also that of the Malay Peninsula and New Guinea."

He noted: "Over a period of 11 years between 2008-2019, he published 21 single authored papers, 36 co-or-multi-authored papers in the Malesian Orchid Journal."

"Without Peter's high quality taxonomic contributions, MOJ wouldn't have reached the very high standard that the botanical world recognises."

Of human interest is Peter and Judy met while doing a science degree at University of Bristol with Peter majoring in chemistry and they got married in 1978 but decided settling down to a conventional life in UK was not what they wanted but seeing the world was.

Off they travelled to first stop Northern Nigeria teaching science for a couple of years, within the ambit of the notorious present day Boko Haram, before moving on to Swaziland for six years where both daughters Jenna and Nicky were born in 1985 and 1987 respectively.

It was Swaziland which ignited Peter's life in orchids.

But Judy attributed one encouraging word from a lady at Kew which destined him to a life-long of writing on orchids non-stop since.

She said it in her book launch speech:

"Living in Swaziland, on Tuesdays I had to teach a science class in the afternoon, so Peter would take baby Jenna on long walks in a backpack over the Swazi grasslands.

"He had always been interested in orchids, and on these walks, he noticed a profusion of different orchids, some species which were not recorded as growing in Swaziland.

"He wrote to a lady at Kew, called Joyce Stewart, the author of the main book on Southern African orchids, and she encouraged him to write an article giving details of his findings,"

"This led him to write his first published article on orchids, entitled 'Orchids discoveries in Swazi Highveld' which was published in African Wildlife magazine.

After half a dozen years in Swaziland, the couple decided to move on again, this time to Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

Is there any wonder he chose Papua New Guinea?

Not according to Judy.

"Peter knew there were lots of orchids endemic to New Guinea but when he got there he found that the only authoritative work on New Guinea orchids had been published in 1917 in Latin by Rudolf Schlechter and nothing since."

After plenty of weekend forays into the jungles with local orchid enthusiasts, within four years the book 'Lowland Orchids of Papua New Guinea' was published in 1994.

But by 1992, they had gone to live in Singapore where they met 'yours truly' Tan Jiew Ho who helped him publish his book in the format Peter wanted.

According to Judy, during a world Conference on Orchids in 2011, Peter was "super-pleased" a journalist wrote an article in the Lifestyle Section of a daily newspaper which christened him the 'Indiana Jones of Southeast Asian Orchids' because of his jungle adventures looking for new orchids.

Going part-time teaching after 2007, it left him plenty of spare time researching orchids at Singapore Herbarium and collaborating with researchers like Dr Ruth Kiew and Ong Poh Teck of FRIM, and volume 2 of A-Z of SE Asian Orchids rolled out.

But the climax to the life of this prolific orchid writer and wife Judy was Sabah where they retired to in 2013.

"Peter and I loved living in Sabah. We appreciated the friendly people, the warm climate, and relaxed way of living.

He revelled the opportunities he found here in Sabah, not only discovering new orchid species, but even new genera, and collaborating with Dr Steven Busuang, Linus Gokusing of Kipandi Park.