country’s coffers’. Experience had shown that laying claim to the labour power of the peasants was a necessary condition for achieving this objective. Consequently, what became known in the first half of the nineteenth century as the cultivation system is correctly interpreted as an expansion and standardization of the regime set in place by the VOC.

After the fall of the VOC

When the VOC was wound up, the possibility of abandoning all interests built up in Asia over a period of two centuries was apparently never considered. There was clearly little doubt about the potential profitability of this distant endeavour. All experts in colonial affairs consulted were in favour of continued exploitation of the Dutch possessions in the East Indies. The Company’s management had proved inefficient and ineffective. From this perspective, state-directed policies would increase colonial production and the consequential benefits for the mother country. After all, the purpose of a colony was to make a profit, and as much as possible. This was the main priority and the interests of the native population should not stand in the way. Only a few were willing to admit that the ideals of the Enlightenment that underpinned both the American War of Independence and the French Revolution should perhaps also be applied to the colonial rule in the tropics. Not of course with full recognition of the universal validity of liberty, equality and fraternity. These principles were essentially applicable only to the white tribes of the Atlantic community, and not to other parts of the world where other races lived and worked. But was it unthinkable for a foreign ruler, while seeking his own benefit, to also concern himself with increasing the happiness and prosperity of his indigenous subjects? Van Hogendorp believed in this civilizing mission and urged that it be recognized.

In terms of our domination of Java this means specifically: ‘to protect these same Inlanders from all violence and hostility from without and within; to provide and assure them of civic liberty, the right to own property, protection from all oppression and the exercise of impartial and fair justice’ (Van Hogendorp 1800: 8). Nevertheless this enlightened politician, too, proved unwilling to demand the unconditional and immediate application of these high ideals.

The advice that the Charter Commission published in 1804 essentially recommended continuation of the existing state of affairs. That was not so surprising since, after Van Hogendorp’s premature departure, Nederburgh had free rein in the Commission. He was the final editor of the report
and made sure that the system of forced cultivation and corvee services remained intact; his opponent’s proposal to acknowledge the peasants as the rightful owners of their fields was explicitly rejected in the text. Nederburgh wrote to the private owner of an estate who had returned to Holland to ask how the indigenous population would respond to abolition of the compulsory cultivation of coffee. The answer he received – that they would no longer grow it – was exactly why Nederburgh wanted to preserve the regime of forced cultivation. The outcome of the clash between the reformers and those who wanted to retain the existing system was determined much more by external conditions than by the power of the arguments on both sides. The political changes in the metropolis made it imperative that the old regime in the colony be maintained for an unspecified period. The uncertainty about the nature and limits of the state-building process in Europe may not have been an obstacle to the drafting of radical plans for reform, but there was no question of these ideas or of a complete new system, as envisaged by Van Hogendorp (1800: 194), being introduced in practice for the time being. That political uncertainty was fuelled by the unpredictability of the economic future. Would an increase in production not lead to a much greater supply of colonial goods than the demand that could be expected to materialize in the world market?

Besides the political and economic volatility, the unfamiliarity of the main actors with the structure of colonial society also played a role in the ambivalent policy climate of these years. Van Hogendorp had only recently returned to Java when he committed his far-reaching reforms to paper. His opponents especially criticized him for his lack of experience with the situation on the workfloor. But this objection, though never explicitly expressed, applied much more to Nederburgh. He based his reform plan completely on what he had been told by Commissioner Nicolaus Engelhard, who was both a fierce defender and one of the main beneficiaries of the Priangan coffee regime, and was dismissed from his post several years later after being accused of involvement in illegal and oppressive practices. Nederburgh’s familiarity with the region that he had been sent to investigate was limited to a week’s tour of Cianjur. The Consideratiën with which he concluded his assignment in 1796 was based on a single source: the Commissioner’s reports on the regencies from the preceding years. As custodian of the colonial archives, De Haan did not have a high opinion of the Company directors’ knowledge of the country and its people towards the end of the eighteenth century. The battle for or against reform was fought without concrete facts or information on which the conflicting parties could agree or disagree.
What was actually known about Java? Very little, according to the archivist himself (De Haan I, 1910: 442). The Commissioner may have had to submit an annual report after the middle of the eighteenth century, but there was no such memorandum left behind when he stepped down. Knowledge gained on the job was hardly recorded and certainly did not go further than his own office. The curiosity of the VOC directors was limited to the Company’s trade results (De Haan I, 1910: 423). With the disappearance of the VOC, an early-colonial state emerged in the early years of the nineteenth century. What form did this take and what arrangements were made for the Priangan Regencies? After all, this remained the first and most profitable region for producing coffee for export to the metropolis. The experience gained in the Priangan was taken into account when drafting plans for the future and new policies were often first tried out here in practice.

A conservative reformer

The transition at home from the Batavian Republic to the newly founded Kingdom of Holland under French tutelage also meant a changing of the guard in the East Indies. A strong character was needed who could bring order to the chaotic colonial affairs and who possessed the military qualities to withstand the growing threat to Java from the English enemy. Herman Willem Daendels was the perfect man for the job. He was already Field Marshall of Holland when he was appointed Governor-General. On arriving in the colony in early 1808, he had a reputation as a domineering personality, which would be confirmed by the way in which he fulfilled his tasks in the three years that followed. His orders had been to prevent the British from taking over Java and, no less important, to bring order and structure to the management of the country’s Asian possessions without causing too much disruption. He was given explicit instructions not to introduce radical reforms (De Haan IV, 1912: 772-4). His first concern was to secure the incomes that were indispensable to Holland’s financial solvability, and there was no doubt about how they were to be obtained. Shortly after his arrival, he announced what would take priority in his policy: the cultivation of coffee (Daendels 1814).

The instruction announcing this intention to continue on the same course was known as the Priangan Ruling. It applied primarily to the region where coffee cultivation had first been made compulsory and had acquired the character of a tax in the form of labour. In Daendels’ opinion, Pieter Engelhard had greatly improved the payments owed to the peasant