Increasing leverage for private estates

In its efforts to increase colonial production, to a large extent driven by the need for ever more funds to finance the development of economy and infrastructure in the metropolis, the Commission-General investigated the advantages and disadvantages of the various options. One was to promote free European colonization and agribusiness. A regulation drawn up in 1818 which effectively heralded the end of the Commission's activities – Van der Capellen remained behind alone as Commissioner-General – ordered that land be issued to European landowners to establish large-scale agricultural enterprises. As soon as it had taken office, the Commission-General had received applications from interested landowners from many quarters with plans to grow crops for export. The tour of Java undertaken by the three members of the Commission in 1817 to acquaint themselves with the situation at local level unleashed a new wave of applications. Under Raffles, a lobby of merchants had emerged, consisting of Europeans and other aliens (including Armenians), who also speculated in land. Many private entrepreneurs came from this mercantile background and, in the 1820s, they endeavoured to meet the growing demand for colonial commodities, not only coffee but also cotton, sugar and indigo. In various parts of Java they concluded rental or lease contracts with members of the landed gentry. These new forms of commercial agriculture were concentrated mainly on the northern coastal plain and the principalities of Central Java. Although this trend was essentially in line with the course set out in the 1818 regulation, Van der Capellen and his colleagues were hesitant about continuing down the same road. There were a number of reasons for this. First of all, there was the uprising that had broken out in 1816 in Krawang and Cirebon, traditional hotspots of unrest. A committee of inquiry reported that the disturbances, stirred up by hangers-on of the exiled sultan, had spread rapidly. There were justifiable fears that it would spill over into the Priangan Regencies. As usual, the people’s anger had been directed at Chinese racketeers. But there was no denying that European landlords had also been guilty of ‘irregular and random appropriations and harassment’. It is interesting to note that Muntinghe, who owned an estate in Indramaju, was among those accused of treating the people living on his land as mere serfs, ‘taillables et corvéables à merci’, always at his beck and call (Van der Kemp 1916: 303-9). It was partly these excesses

16 For a description of the repressive labour regime on the private estates during this period, see Stevens 1982: 123-65.
that caused Van der Capellen to be less than accommodating to applicants for new concessions. Ironically it was Muntinghe himself who advised him to impose strict conditions on issuing land concessions.

Excluded shall be not only kampongs and dessas, but also all lands known to the village council and lying within the bounds of the village, or used as grazing land for cattle. No Javanese shall be put to work on these lands, except that they themselves choose to do, and for payment of a full day’s wage. (Van Deventer I, 1865: 345)

In addition to this fear of excessive exploitation of the indigenous population by the European-led agribusinesses, there was another argument against the alienation of land to private interests. Many of these landlords were not of Dutch origin and the policy-makers were concerned that their growing prominence might upset the political stability of the colony (Ottow 1937: 67). Van der Capellen’s reluctance to issue new concessions angered many old hands. Conversely, however, he was initially hesitant to buy back land that had been privatized in the past, despite calls to this effect from many supporters of state control.

The property that De Wilde had accumulated through successive purchases – first together with Raffles as the major partner and then with Nicolaus Engelhard, by taking over the share of the British Governor at a bargain price – covered a thinly populated and largely still uncultivated area of Sukabumi, the size of a small Dutch province, in the western part of the Priangan highlands. The new owner started his large-scale agribusiness in 1814 by encouraging the cultivation of paddy. He took considerable care to ensure that the peasants could grow sufficient food to live on by constructing a network of irrigation canals. Furthermore, it was not only local people who were permitted to cultivate the land. Newcomers were also encouraged to settle in and around Sukabumi. At that time, labour was scarcer than farmland and De Wilde realized that he needed to attract more people to his lands if he were to increase production. When he purchased the land, there were some 16,000 people living on it. Their number was to rise to far above 20,000 in the years that followed. This explains how, in 1814, the Regent of Cianjur lost not only a third of his land but also a substantial proportion of his subjects. The latter probably contributed to the decline in

17 For a description of the life and long career of this largest private landowner known on Java, see De Haan I, Personalia, 1910: 284-309. De Wilde’s own publications also add much information to De Haan’s account.
his income much more than the former. Land-poor peasants in particular would have surrendered to the temptation to desert their patron in the hope of a better future under the tutelage of a large landlord. In his later years, De Wilde described why and how he had taken the measurement of the land in the five districts that comprised his estate. For those who had remained landless, spatial mobility was an opportunity to rise a little up the agrarian ladder.

Food security for his tenants was not the only reason that De Wilde gave priority to the cultivation of paddy. The right to a fifth part of the harvest had been transferred from the regent to the new landlord, so that the owner of Sukabumi also had an interest in increasing paddy production. As a result of these efforts, the yield of the main food crop almost doubled in the first six years of operation (De Haan I, Personalia, 1910: 292). Because the estate was not too far from Batavia, De Wilde was able – despite the lack of proper roads and other difficulties with transport – to sell his share of the harvest for a good price on the market. The building of rice-husking mills was clear evidence that this food crop had become an attractive commercial commodity. Ensuring that the increase in growing paddy did not occur at the expense of coffee production was a major point of concern for the colonial authorities. Under the British, many coffee gardens had been converted into paddy fields, a move that was commented upon as regrettable when Dutch rule was restored, as it would mean less profit for the government. Absolute priority could not be given to the forced cultivation of what remained the main export crop, as this would create the risk of food shortages. In that respect, De Wilde appears to have made the right choice by steering a middle course between the two. He made it possible for the peasants to grow paddy in irrigated fields, but also forced them to plant coffee on dry ground. The result was a rise in production for both crops, though the increase was more even for paddy than for coffee. Years of rapid growth in the volume of coffee harvested, such as 1817-18, were followed by a temporary fallback to a much lower level.

The problem was less one of unstable production than of getting the coffee onto the market. The sale of the land and its exploitation as a large-scale enterprise run by European owners or managers not only required the preservation of forced cultivation but also the compulsory supply of coffee to the government at the same low price as was maintained throughout the Priangan Regencies. As Sukabumi fell outside the control of the regulated regime, suspicions arose that private landlords like De Wilde were guilty of illegal practices. Rather than supplying the coffee to the two designated warehouses at the officially fixed low price, they could make a much higher
profit by selling it outside the zone covered by the government monopoly. Once it arrived at places along the coast, in the vicinity of Batavia, in Cirebon or Banten, the coffee was immediately worth much more than when delivered in the Priangan Regencies. Smuggling – which is what the clandestine transport of the goods from the closed to the free market boiled down to – took place through a black market circuit in which consignments of goods repeatedly changed hands. By the end of its journey, the price of the coffee had risen to a multiple of what had been paid for it at the start (Van der Kemp 1916: 210). The increase in value during transport was typical of a monopoly system with purchase prices at the source of production therefore set at a minimum level from higher up. It is striking that these suspicions of illicit trade focused especially on the private landowners. There was no lack of evidence that the regents and lower chiefs were equally as guilty of evading the compulsory supply of coffee. They were undoubtedly more skilled in evading government control of their covert deals than the large landowners, who remained strangers in their own domains.

It would have been easy to put a stop to the smuggling of coffee by raising the price to the level paid for it on the free market. This simple solution was, however, rejected again and again. The first argument, nothing more than a pretext, was that there was no pressure at all to do this from the supply side. The regents did not openly voice their complaints, and the peasants even less. Remunerating the indigenous managers more handsomely would enrich them to an extent that would upset the existing balance of power. Rewarding the peasants more would be inadvisable because what they were paid had been shown to be sufficient to meet their simple needs. But De Wilde and Engelhard, the joint owners of Sukabumi, protested – not against the forced cultivation of coffee but against its compulsory supply to the government at what they considered too low a price. The answer from the colonial policy-makers was that no other interest should have priority above making the maximum profit. The Commissioners-General, to whom both landlords directed their complaints, refused to allow them to sell the coffee on the free market or even to legalize the sale of land in the Priangan to private landowners. Lawick, the newly appointed Inspector of the Land-Rent Department, proved to be responsible for this unsympathetic response. Commissioner-General Van der Capellen showed De Wilde and Engelhard the coffee report from 1818 in which Lawick and his deputy had expressed their disapproval of the continued existence of private domains in the Priangan Regencies. Their response was of course highly critical. For a start, they decried the lack of feeling with which Lawick, who was familiar with the miserable plight of the highland peasantry, had resisted
any increase in the price paid to the simple coffee planters. They were also very scathing about the force used to extort the peasants’ labour. The far too heavy burden imposed upon them left them insufficient time to grow food. Pitiful was how they described the lot of the people of the Priangan Regencies. It was not a response that brought the parties closer together. The owners of Sukabumi followed a course that challenged the monopoly system in the Priangan Regencies and led them to clash with the top of the colonial apparatus.

The downfall of the free enterprise lobby

It should come as no surprise that the Priangan gentry did not exactly appreciate the presence of these foreign intruders in their backyard. The latter conducted themselves in a completely different way, as energetic businessmen driven by their own enlightened self-interest to make their enterprises a success (De Wilde 1830: 199). Although they lived in comfort and luxury on their estates, their treatment of the peasants was at variance with that of the Sundanese nobles. De Wilde himself drew attention to this difference in 1815, when he had the opportunity to attend an audience of the regent of Cianjur. He summarized his impressions of courtly ostentation as follows.

The [regent] is seen as an elevated personage, and enjoys the slavish respect of all the people. No one, not even the highest of chiefs, may approach him standing up, but must do so crawling on the ground. If the chiefs of the outer districts of this Regency are summoned or come of their own accord, they are admitted to the Regent on their hands and knees, and are permitted to touch his knee with their hands folded together. But lower chiefs and common folk fall to the ground, bow their heads on their folded hands, after which they may, very quickly, touch his foot. (De Wilde 1830: 173)

When Commissioner-General Van der Capellen, together with his brother Robert – who he had appointed Resident in the Priangan Regencies – decided that owners of private estates were not permitted to make use of corvee services which the peasants were obliged to render, this was an immediate and direct threat to the continued existence of the large agribusinesses. That a similar ban had been in force since the time of Daendels and Raffles, without civil servants of all ranks taking any notice of this