

## CHAPTER 6

# RUST EN ORDE: THE DUTCH EAST INDIES

**T**he road unspooled ahead across soft, green countryside. It was the wettest part of the year—the late months of 1834—and the air was clean and cool. Skeins of cloud hung over the landscape, and the interlocking ridges floated on a cushion of haze. This was the heart of the Priangan highlands, the hulk of up-thrown country that forms the hinterland of West Java. In earlier centuries, this had been the stomping ground of the old Sundanese kingdoms, and the name of the place—a contraction of *para-hyang-an*—contained that same ageless Austronesian idea as the Dieng Plateau, further west along the same mountain chain: *hyang*, expressing the concept of deity. This was an abode of ancient gods. But for all its misty mysticism, and for all its apparent fertility, the man making his way along the road could see that something was amiss.

The man's name was Louis Vitalis. He had been born in France into a merchant family of Greek descent, and had come out to Java in the service of the Dutch. He was an inspector employed to tour the countryside and to take notes of the conditions. He had been sent here to investigate concerns raised by Otto Carel

Holmberg de Beckfelt, the Dutch resident in overall charge of Priangan, that the system of land management so recently introduced to the Dutch East Indies was leading to horrific suffering up here in the hills.

The resident's concerns had been well founded. Many of the locals Vitalis passed at the wayside were in a pitiable state. Here and there he spotted a corpse in the long grass beside the road. But there was no epidemic, and there ought to have been no hunger. The calamity that was killing people here was, as far as Vitalis was concerned, entirely man-made. Large tracts of the land on either side of the road had been given over to growing indigo, a spindly shrub producing a blue dye that would, later in the century, give the classic blue tint to the newly invented denim jeans. The emaciated men were labourers on these indigo plantations, and they had, quite simply, been worked to death.

'Truly their situation is lamentable and really miserable', Vitalis wrote. 'What else can one expect? On the roads as well as the plantations one does not meet people but only walking skeletons, which drag themselves with great difficulty from one place to another, often dying in the process'.

When he reached the district headquarters Vitalis grilled the local regent, Raden Anggadipa II. The regent was a scion of a princely dynasty, part of that old stratum of aristocrats that had always run the countryside for indigenous sultans and VOC officials alike. Daendels had despised them, of course, but in the 1830s they were back in favour. Raden Anggadipa reported that 'some of the labourers who work in the plantations are in such a state of exhaustion that they die almost immediately after they have eaten from the food which is delivered to them as an advance payment for the produce to be delivered later'. When Vitalis demanded to know why the bodies of the victims were left to lie at the roadside instead of being given a decent burial, the regent shrugged. There was, he said, no need to make the effort: 'Every night these bodies are dragged away by the tigers...'

It would have been easy enough for Vitalis to dismiss the outrage as entirely the doing of the ossified aristocrat before him, and to place the blame on 'oriental despotism'. But he knew that such excuses would not stand up to much scrutiny, for the regent was merely effecting the orders for a wider system, introduced five years earlier and designed to raise colonial revenues—and, it was claimed, to improve the lot of the peasants in Dutch-held territories. It was painfully obvious, however, that here in Priangan this so-called *Cultuurstelsel*, this 'Cultivation System', had gone horribly wrong.