Preface

The events described in this book took place a hundred years ago. The reason for reconstructing them, however, is not just historical interest. I am convinced that they paint a dramatic picture of clashing cultures, comparable to many encounters in contemporary development cooperation. The story unfolds in one of the few Asiatic countries that never needed to relinquish its political and cultural autonomy to a Western power. Dutch hydraulic engineer J. Homan van der Heide is the main protagonist.

This is not a volume designed to fit in a series of monographs about ‘great Dutch engineers’. Even less is it a biography. My theme is the interaction between a Dutch and a Thai environment or, more specifically, interaction between ideas shaped by the Delft culture of technological schooling (plus experience in the Dutch Indies) and a Thai bureaucracy in a process of radical transformation. A biography would trace the complete chronological progression of Homan van der Heide’s life history. I do not. Although the man is crucial to the story I include but scant information about his earlier work on Java or about how he fared after he left Siam. Such matters are mentioned only where they are pertinent to his Siamese experience.

This is Siamese history far more than Dutch. In this book the Siamese are the ‘natives’ speaking, initiating, acting and reacting. The title may suggest that the Dutch engineer was in control, but this ‘king of the waters’ remained virtually unknown in his own country. The honorific hints at irony as well. To my mind King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, the fifth king in the Chakri dynasty, called the Great King), at one point introducing ‘Mr Homan van der Heide, King of the waters’ to one of his guests, was quite aware of this. He probably knew that already in seventeenth-century Siam, Hollanders were thought of as ‘landless buccaneers’ and that the quality of the stadholder, highest authority in Holland, was doubtful because he was rumoured to rule waters only.

The epithet ‘king of the waters’ is expressive of this Dutch engineer’s absolute character as well. He brooked no argument, was convinced he was right and in his own field could not accept a boss above him. His behaviour must have radiated pretensions that in non-colonial Asia would be the sole
prerogative of kings. But these very traits in Homan van der Heide allow me to present his story as a drama.

The book also offers a description and analysis of the transformation of Siam at the beginning of the twentieth century. At issue is the complex of wet rice cultivation, state intervention and water management that at the time was essential to the prosperity and well-being of Siam. At present this configuration is in evident retreat. Thailand is moving on, leaving behind this ancient and slowly transforming complex of water, rice and state. In the course of the past twenty years dependence on rice as foremost export product has all but disappeared. This is not because rice cultivation is shrinking; rather, the significance of rice as source of national wealth is taken over by a broad variety of other products. More income is derived from computers, electronic appliances, gems, frozen fish and rubber. Agriculture is now part of an economy of industrial production, and labour is transferred to non-agricultural sectors. In progress is a transition to a post-agrarian society, although irrigation still is crucial for rice cultivation.

The changes over the past 100 years are apparent in the two faces many old towns and villages now present. On the front side they are accessed by waterways; here we find the temple, market, school, district office and police station. Meanwhile, somewhere at the rear a connection materialized with the post-war road system; new markets arise near the bus station and in the vicinity new factories are being established. Outside the old village or pasted onto it a new system is developing. The rear entry gradually gobbles up the front. Today, even eighteen-lane roadways, in part elevated on fifteen-meter pillars, are inadequate to cope with Bangkok’s two million motor cars.

The material for this book was collected between 1982 and 1986 in the National Archives in Bangkok and to a lesser extent in archives and libraries in the Netherlands. I defended the book as PhD thesis at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in December 1995. Would I write it differently in 2004? Obviously, the historical material is the same; no new data have appeared. Hence, the question remains whether I would arrive at a different interpretation. To be sure, there may be other perspectives, simply because they are current or even dominant so that it is hard to avoid them. I can think of two of these. One derives from the international discourse, the other is characteristic for the Thai debate.

The contemporary climate of opinion could press me to position the Dutch engineer in colonial or post-colonial terms. I have not done so and see no reason to alter this. The detailed description of Homan van der Heide’s activities in Siam demonstrates the complex contradiction between his genius and blindness. Was his position colonial? In some sense of course it was, but in other senses he operated beyond that categorization. How shall we classify his obsession with the welfare of Thai rice-growing farmers, how his great
respect for King Chulalongkorn? The Siamese depended on his knowledge and his work in turn depended on them; he was both king and servant.

As to the Thai debate: one major figure in this book is King Chulalongkorn. In 2004 the public memory presents a rather different portrait. Since the 1990s a powerful, pervasive and public cult was developed around his person, although there is little additional research about him based on archival documents. It seems to me that I have ‘the advantage of backwardness’ here. What I wrote is based on the archives only; nowadays it is difficult to avoid biases inspired by the forceful public image of King Chulalongkorn.

To some readers I should perhaps apologize for the use of rather technical information in Chapter V. I found it unavoidable. The technical story is very much part and parcel of the other aspects of Homan van der Heide’s work in Siam – and it is straightforwardly logical. I tried to limit the main text to the basic argument and put less essential details in footnotes which the reader need not necessarily consult.

A number of people have contributed to the writing of this book. Naturally, none of them is responsible for its shortcomings. In the early 1980s, when I still hesitated about the topic, discussions with Kees van der Meer and Hans van Marle helped me to make up my mind. In finding my way in the historical Thai sources and obtaining access to the Thai National Archives I could not have done without the sympathetic assistance of Chatthip Nartsupha and Suntharee Arsvai. Contacts with colleague-researchers in or associated with the National Archives in Bangkok nourished my enthusiasm. I recall especially stimulating conversations with Suthy Prasartserth, Sivarak Siwarom, Sutthada Lekwaitoon, Ian Brown and others. After my return to the Netherlands discussions with Wim Hendrikx and David Feeny were of great help to me. The work in the archives was not only fascinating but also most pleasant, largely thanks to the lady staff in the National Archives. Their helpfulness and cordiality made the daily five-hour bus ride bearable. I would express my gratitude to the staff of the National Research Council of Thailand for their help in solving the formal problems attending an extended stay in Thailand.

I regret that Mrs Canne-Homan van der Heide never did see the results of this research. This daughter of the Dutch engineer whose Siamese work is central to this book passed away in the spring of 1995. It was she who pointed the way for my writing by the manner in which she spoke of her father. She had the gift to portray his, sometimes grotesque, greatness, but also his shortcomings and idiosyncrasies, always recounted with affection – remarkable mildness for a ninety-year-old who still considered herself a militant socialist towards a father who was ‘wrong’ in World War II. Unable to do so herself, she invited me to climb the stairs to the attic to peruse old papers stored under the roof. I came upon the collection of photographs of which I made copious use for this publication. I am also grateful for the information given
and the material made available by other relatives, in particular Mr J. Homan van der Heide, our engineer’s grandson, and Mr J.H. de Vey Mestdagh.

I am deeply indebted to Sonsak Shusawat. He helped me to make efficacious use of the limited time available for my research in the Thai archives. He carried out a preliminary exploration of relevant documents in the National Archives in Bangkok which not only enabled me to arrive at the definitive decision to engage in this research, but was also of inestimable value in the search for further material.

A number of colleagues in the former department South and Southeast Asia of the Universiteit van Amsterdam have played stimulating roles. I would mention Basuki Gunawan, Frans Hüskens, John Kleinen, Henk Schulte Nordholt and John Wiersma and, of course, especially Otto van den Muijzenberg, who supervised my writing of the thesis. I am grateful to the department staff as a whole for their collegiality, making it possible for me to spend longer periods in Thailand and obtain a degree of mastery in the Thai language that under the present curriculum for thesis-writing can no longer be achieved.

As I worked with the Thai sources various persons aided me. To decipher hard-to-read handwriting Naddaphorn ten Brummelhuis was of great help; during the writing phase I had long hours of assistance on the part of Apinya Feuangfusakul; and in the very last phase Dr Ardchara Pengphanich helped me by checking some translations.

Baas Terwiel commented extensively on the text of the thesis, and so saved me from committing a large number of inaccuracies and some errors. John Kleinen, Irene Stengs and Arno Ooms took the trouble to go through the manuscript and to comment on it. Whatever shortcomings remain, they are the very last to blame.

The preparation of this English text was made possible through a contribution by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), for which I am most grateful.

I value the pleasant (and instructive) collaboration with the translator, John N. Kraay. It was no fault of his that the work was laid aside for some time. On the contrary, I doubt whether without his persistence the project would have been realized at all.