CHAPTER FOUR

DAYS OF RECKONING (1784–1795)

'We, with much affection, wish, dear gentlemen, that you will be discharged with more honour and glory, after a lengthy [service in the] administration, so that you may at long last in your old age enjoy in tranquillity and peace under your vines and fig tree, the fruits of many years of wandering in the service of the Company.'

Weyerman and Sweers de Landas

With these lines, the departing commander Godefridus Weyerman and his second-in-charge Johan Anthonij Sweers de Landas reflected upon the carefree retirement that servants of the Company hoped for after many years of hard work in service of the VOC in Asia. It is not specified where exactly Cornelius Breekpot and François von Abscouw, whom they addressed, intended to enjoy their retirement. One thing is for sure, in the period 1784–95 the political and economic circumstances in Cochin more or less forced people to decide where they would settle down in retirement. The decade from 1784, the end of the Fourth Anglo–Dutch War, and 1795, when the Dutch Republic was invaded by the French, stands for days of reckoning for the servants of the VOC at Cochin. Political change in Europe became the guiding force for alliances and hostilities in those parts of India in which Europeans had a pronounced presence. Fort Cochin was no exception.

In retrospect it can safely be asserted that the fate of the Dutch inhabitants of Fort Cochin and their dependents was decided by the outcome of the power struggle between the English and the French in South Asia. As early as 1761, a glimpse of the British opinion on the Dutch in Asia can be gained from a letter of Robert Orme (b. 1728–d. 1801) to Robert Clive. Himself an English East India Company servant, Orme authored many books on the places he visited during the course of his service in Asia and specifically India. In this letter from Batavia he penned his impressions of the Dutch East India Company. Considering the rivalries in Europe, Orme was of the opinion that the British had no cause for worry about the Dutch in India: ‘… we can never have anything to fear from them, while they have much to fear from us’. He further remarked that the Dutch had great possessions in India but were incapable of defending them. He then wrote a detailed review of Batavia. It is a rather glum report and at one point he writes, ‘Dutchmen are little better than
mere Indians. He felt that the English, at any point they wished, could take Batavia. He believed that Cochin had always depended on Batavia for military help, and even so the Dutch had been unable to defeat the natives—a reference to the VOC’s defeat by Travancore at the battle of Colachel in 1741. He further described the poor condition of the fortifications in Cochin and how some of the bastions were falling apart. In his description, Nagappattinam and Bengal were just as poorly defended. He believed that had the Dutch paid attention to their forts and garrisons as much the English had to theirs, they would have been on an equal footing with the English. He also stated that the English were in an advantageous position due to the revenues they earned from Bengal while the Dutch in India lacked anything comparable. Orme commented upon the two Companies’ relations with the indigenous states. While the Dutch had been at war on the Malabar Coast, they had maintained peace in Coromandel. The English, on the other hand, were at peace on the Malabar Coast, but were involved in very costly wars on the Coromandel Coast. Not without admiration, he claimed that the VOC did not export bullion from the Netherlands to Batavia and in this way avoided draining the mother country of precious metals as other European East India Companies were obliged to do. With the help of figures on military deployments of the EIC and the VOC, he further illustrated how easy it would be for the English to overrun Batavia.

**Winds of Change**

Developments linked to the French Revolution preoccupied much of western and central Europe between 1789 and 1800, but the Dutch Republic was also undergoing profound political changes in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth century. Taking advantage of this political instability, England set out to forge an empire in India. This process had begun much earlier, but with new developments in Europe, England’s position and policy towards India changed. The English were always wary of French ambitions and they played a central role in opposing France in both Europe and Asia.

**England and the EIC**

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, the proprietors and directors at the East India House in Leadenhall Street, London, debated long and hard on the forward policies of the EIC, though always with a view to securing their own private profits first. On the one hand, the Company was deep in debt, yet on the other hand, the ‘India interests’ were anxious...