PART 3

International Trade in the Austrian Netherlands, a Study of Five Key Sectors
In the following chapters I will look into the nature of the relation between international trade and economic development in five specific sectors. Firstly, the data on import and export of individual commodities (transit will only follow in Part Four), can reveal which sectors were flourishing and which were withering away (both on the international and the domestic market), but will also shed light on other kinds of changes that were brought about by international trade flows. Finally, the micro-perspective of individual commodities and industries will allow us to highlight the role of the government and its trade policy for these different sectors and its impact on the different stakeholders involved, such as merchants, producers, manufacturers and consumers.

The selected sectors span a very large part of the eighteenth-century economy in the Southern Low Countries. They include the vital primary sector with both its traditional agricultural and its proto-industrial activities, shed light on some well-known traditional urban sectors such as wool, lace and silk manufacturing, on new ‘industrial’ sectors like cotton printing, sugar refining and large-scale coal mining, they unveil the influential trade in exotic commodities from the New World, but the selection also does not neglect everyday – but highly necessary – manufacturing sectors such as salt refining. They enable us to give the necessary differentiations to the history of international trade.

The latter sector will be discussed first, because it is actually a near to inexorable pick when studying international trade. Without any crude salt resources of their own, salt was very much subject to international trade in the Austrian Netherlands. Moreover, salt had an intriguing dual character because it was at the same time a consumer good (the finished product of the growing salt refining industry) and an industrial resource, for example in textile bleaching. The success of the salt sector is thereby also a prelude to the second chapter, which focuses on textiles. The textile sector was by far the most important manufacturing sector at the time and was – as we will see – undergoing major changes during the second half of the eighteenth century, among others because of the effects of international trade. While domestic textile producers did their best to adapt to changing fashions triggered by trade, it will be very exiting to see what happens in cases where the Low Countries were not able to provide a decent alternative for imports; indeed, when a substitute was entirely out of the question and consumer demand roared. Coffee, sugar and other colonial commodities will complete that part of the story in section 3. Finally, we will go to the large resource industries: namely coal mining and agriculture (in particular grain production). For these sectors, relatively little has been said on international trade, but as these goods formed – or would form in the case of coal – the very basis of the economy, the conclusions reached here have a very broad scope.