CHAPTER TEN

CHILDREN OF THE FUTURE

‘It is time that we seek to turn this world into a heaven.’ With these words Lambert van Eck summarised the main objective of the National Assembly, at the same time describing the very essence of utopian-revolutionary thinking. Heaven on earth was within reach, if only people would actively intervene to combine enlightenment and Christianity. It might take some time to bring this about, and Lambert doubted that he would live to see this man-made paradise, but he was certain that subsequent generations would reap the benefits of the Batavian Revolution. In the address delivered upon his election as president of the National Assembly, Lambert van Eck therefore stressed the importance of furthering ‘the happiness of present and future generations’.

His fellow representatives in the Assembly no doubt agreed with him. After all, the pursuit of happiness, which all enlightened spirits considered a goal of life, had been included by Thomas Jefferson – an acquaintance of Lambert – in the American Declaration of Independence. For centuries humankind had placed its hopes of happiness in the hereafter, but now the time had come to achieve happiness on earth. A proposal was made in the National Assembly to include a similar passage in the Dutch ‘Declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen’, but unfortunately the representatives could not decide whether happiness should accrue to the individual or to the nation as a whole, with the result that the concept did not find its way into Dutch legislation.

The members of the National Assembly were inclined to compare their meetings to a school, as Lambert van Eck had done in his address by referring to the ‘School of the Enlightenment’. The realisation of a heaven on earth involved a learning curve in which mistakes would inevitably be made, as the French Revolution had shown. There, too, the revolutionaries had been inspired by the conviction that their efforts would benefit future generations. Mirabeau had closed Aux Bataves, his appeal to the Dutch people, with the exhortation: ‘Fortunate are those who will spill their last drops of blood for the fatherland! They will take with them to their graves the comforting thought of having brought
people nearer to happiness, and will leave to their children the legacy of their virtues. The progressive French philosopher Condorcet was convinced that the happiness achieved for future generations would have a cumulative effect: each generation would be happier than the previous one. These revolutions, both French and Batavian, were therefore seen as a rebirth, a rejuvenation of society, or as Swildens described it, ‘momentous now, memorable hereafter’.

**Political Schooling**

The Dutch people were still in need of a great deal of education, according to one of the articles in Lambert’s handwritten encyclopaedia. He divided people into three ‘classes’. The first class comprised those governing the country, the people ‘who wielded a share of the supreme power’. The second group was formed by ‘all burghers, that is, decent citizens, tradespeople or otherwise, craftsmen, and so on’. The third ‘class’ was the ‘rabble’, characterised by Van Eck as ‘the dregs of the nation’, a ‘bastard branch, which one must put up with but keep carefully cropped, to prevent it from darkening the whole body of the

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Fig. 137. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* is explained to a child. From *Weekblad voor Kinderen*, 1798–1800.