CHAPTER IX

Binding on the iron yoke
The returned Dutch administration, the impoverishment of the south-central Javanese peasantry and the rise of millenarian expectations, 1816-1822

Squaring the circle

The period which followed the formal British handover of Java and its dependencies on 19 August 1816 saw a doomed attempt by the returned Dutch administration to square the circle between the demands of economic liberalism and the interests of the local population. The new governor-general, G.A.G.Ph. van der Capellen (in office 1816-1826), took the task of protecting the indigenous inhabitants from foreign exploitation particularly to heart. During a voyage to Maluku in 1824, he noted in his diary that Dutch colonialism ‘could no longer go forward solely with an eye to making profit, but should secure the welfare of the people and uplift them from [their] state of degradation and contempt’ (De Prins 2002:140, citing Nieuwenhuys 1973:82). These were words which might have passed the lips of any early twentieth-century Dutch ‘ethical’ official inspired by the notion of Holland’s ‘Debt of Honour’ in which the wealth drawn from the Indies was to be repaid by giving primacy to the local population in colonial policy (Ricklefs 1993:151). The problem for Van der Capellen was that he was almost a century before his time. And he recognised this fact. In the same year in which he was committing his private thoughts to his diary, he burst out in a lament to the Dutch Minister of the Colonies, his former commissioner-general colleague (1816-1819), C.Th. Elout, that ‘whenever I see that in the Netherlands people understand liberalism to mean the protection of European landowners at the cost of the native population, and that the latter, who are so dear to me, are completely lost from view in order that a few [European] speculators and adventurers can succeed in their plans, then I must declare myself an ultra-anti-liberal’ (De Prins 2002:140, citing Mijer 1878:190). Even Nahuys, diametrically opposed as he was to Van der Capellen in so many areas of economic