

3. Inspiration after British abolition in 1833

Anyone with financial interests in slavery or involved in the administration of the colonial empire was well aware that abolition could lead to unrest and even the collapse of imperial power. During the French Revolution a major uprising broke out in the Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue, ending slavery there in 1793 and subsequently (albeit only temporarily) throughout the French overseas empire. Barely ten years later, that upheaval resulted in the territory declaring its independence. This was obviously a blow for the slave owners, who would henceforth emphasise any and every step towards abolition had to be taken slowly. Especially in the Netherlands, gradualism and caution became constant watchwords in the public discourse around this issue. For precisely that reason, the sudden passing of the British Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 came as a shock to Dutch plantation owners.

The turning point in the debate in the United Kingdom came after a large-scale rebellion broke out in Demerara in August 1823. Up until then, such uprisings had wiped the subject of abolition off the political agenda; its opponents invariably argued that the very mention of the topic only fuelled unrest and violence, and that these uprisings proved enslaved people were incapable of coping with freedom.²³² The events in Demerara unfolded in such a way those arguments were no longer tenable. Rather than turning against the British authority as such, the rebels in Demerara had made reasonable demands. For example, they wanted to attend church on Sundays and asked for clarification regarding rumours claiming their release was imminent. Moreover, the owners and overseers taken captive by the rebels, wrote a letter stating that they were treated well. Nevertheless, British troops opened fire on the mutineers and put down their uprising with force. This violence would not have gone unnoticed amongst those in the Netherlands with interests in the colony. One Louis, enslaved on the

plantation *Vriendschap*, who was mortgaged by Alexander Gogel, helped lead the revolt and was hanged.²³³ And Van Eeghen & Co had a stake in loans for *La Bonne Intention* in Demarara. The rebel Lindor was accused of having ordered the burning of that estate and was beheaded by the British, his severed head put on display on a roadside stake.²³⁴

The fate suffered by Lindor had been part of the repertoire of repression in the slave colonies since the seventeenth century, but the British public of the 1820s found it hard to stomach. At least as shocking from their point of view was the death of an Anglican missionary named John Smith who had been sentenced to death by the colonial authorities for stoking the uprising. When he died in his cell, he became a martyr for the abolitionist cause.²³⁵ After a long period in the doldrums, the British abolitionist movement experienced a sudden revival. The revitalised movement exerted an unprecedented appeal throughout Britain and many hundreds of petitions were started calling for the immediate, not gradual, abolition of slavery. The subject remained high on the political agenda for the next ten years until finally, in 1833, the Westminster parliament voted for complete abolition. The developments in the Netherlands proved very different in response to the rising of 1823 and the abolition of 1833.

Even given the renewed pressure from an active abolitionist movement, the British decision to end slavery throughout their empire and to compensate owners came rather abruptly. The pace of these developments on the other side of the North Sea also put the issue firmly back on the Dutch political agenda after a long period during which it had not been discussed. Abolition by the British made it inevitable that the Netherlands would have to follow suit sooner or later.²³⁶ DNB directors Joan Huydecoper van Maarsseveen (d. 1817-1836) and Johannes Luden (d. 1836-1864), for example, both owners of people enslaved in British colonies, drew upon what happened to help shape their ideas about Dutch abolition. That they had holdings in those territories was a direct consequence of the wrangling about the return to the Netherlands of colonies occupied by the British during the Napoleonic wars; in 1814 they had refused to relinquish the most economically promising of these – including Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice – leaving a number of plantations founded with Dutch capital under British rule. The Dutch history of these colonies would later fade from memory, but in the early nineteenth century its legacy was still very real.²³⁷ Not everything about the process of abolition was positive in the

eyes of the plantation owners, though. Its catalyst in particular, a general slave rebellion in Demerara unleashing an almost uncontrollable popular movement in the United Kingdom itself and so precipitating an end to enslavement within just a few years, was viewed with disquiet. For the Dutch political policymakers and slave owners alike, retaining control of the entire process was paramount.

On 1 August 1834, the Slavery Abolition Act came into force and contained four key provisions. First, everyone living in slavery in the British Empire was declared free with immediate effect. For the time being, however, all former slaves were to continue working for their former owners for part of the week as apprentices. And the owners were to be compensated with 40 per cent of the nominal value of their slaves. Finally, sugar from British colonies would be protected on the home market. The act did not end the political campaigning, though, which now turned its attention to the apprenticeship system. In 1838 a successful campaign was launched to end the apprenticeship in that same year, two years earlier than planned and the former slave owners had hoped.²³⁸ This idea of a transitional period between slavery and full emancipation would become a major topic of debate in the Netherlands during its own run-up to abolition.

British abolition at a Dutch conference table

How British abolition and its aftermath were viewed in the Netherlands can be reconstructed with the help of unique personal papers left by DNB director Huydecoper van Maarsseveen. Amongst these are the minutes of a meeting of directors and commissioners of the plantations *Hermitage*, *Jardin de Provence*, and *Herstelling* in Demerara. On 11 February, 1836, they gathered at Huydecoper's home. This record of their deliberations provides a detailed insight into the way plantation owners were thinking in the wake of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, and now also faced with the emergence of new production methods. Although far removed from their estates, the owners kept close eye on proceedings by way of their supervisors on the ground. The dynamics of the plantation economy entailed the movement of enslaved people on a large scale – no longer across the Atlantic, but mainly within territories. In the United States, for instance, there was forced domestic migration into the so-called “Cotton South”. And in Brazil, labour was involuntarily relocated to centres of sugar production.

In Surinam, too, during this period 15 per cent of the enslaved population were moved from cotton and coffee plantations to sugar estates.²³⁹

The supervisor of *Hermitage* in Demerara had reported to the owners in the Netherlands he was forced to move its 100 enslaved people to *Herstelling*. The quality of the soil on *Hermitage* was “incomprehensibly poor”, he wrote, and the abandonment of an adjacent plantation was causing major problems with the water supply.²⁴⁰ But the knife cut both ways. On the one hand, the transfer of the enslaved labour had the advantage that they would be “infinitely more useful” at *Herstelling* and “save the costs of the managers” at *Hermitage*, but on the other “that displacement should also take place before the registration of the negroes as a result of the decreed emancipation, whilst additionally the steam engine, the iron kettle and everything else suitable for use and transportation” were also moved to *Herstelling*.²⁴¹

By moving around their workforce, the plantation owners were not yet finished with the modernisation of their businesses. The labourers they had previously enslaved now demanded the construction of railways, and the purchase of “such machinery as could lighten their work.”²⁴² These investments had become “especially necessary ... since the government’s imposition of only 7½ hours of work per day, during which time it was impossible to prepare sugar in the old way, so that since emancipation truly a lot of money has been spent on hiring the negroes as workmen in their free time.”²⁴³ An earlier attempt of the commissioner to sell the holding in *Hermitage* at its determined value had failed, because by that time “the rumour of emancipation was gaining ground” and it appeared “all eagerness to buy [had] suddenly ... disappeared.”²⁴⁴ On the other hand, the owners were cheered by the fact the British government had paid out the compensation due: “For the combined holdings of this fund, a claim was made for 320 negroes amounting to £17,061.”²⁴⁵ The meeting now faced a decision as to how to pay out this money to the investors.

As a DNB director with wide-ranging interests in the slavery-based economy, Huydecoper had experienced with abolition in the British case and he had received compensation from the British government. Failed coffee harvests and low coffee and sugar prices, combined with the new British legislation, were seriously affecting the financial health of the plantations. As it had already done elsewhere, the transfer of their enslaved workforces from coffee and cotton fields to sugar estates, together with the installation of steam mills, promised solace.²⁴⁶ The owners

gathered at Huydecoper's home thus had little reason to fear that the Slavery Abolition Act would seriously harm their interests in the British West Indies, even though there were always concerns about its demonstrative effect and thus a rise in rebellious behaviour. The minutes provide tangible evidence of the actions taken by owners like Huydecoper to prevent the people they enslaved fleeing to territories where emancipation had already taken place.²⁴⁷



Johannes Luden.

Source: [66735], RKD Netherlands Institute for Art History.

Huydecoper was not the only DNB director to receive British compensation during this period. After his death in 1836, he was succeeded by Johannes Luden (d. 1836-1864),²⁴⁸ whose wife Anna Catharina Duker had inherited a 27/144th stake in the Demerara plantation *Cornelia Ida* two years earlier.²⁴⁹ Behind such detached accounts of property, shares, and inheritances lie many real stories of power and powerlessness, and here we find one of them. Anna Catharina's bequest embroiled her in an unequal struggle between her mother's family, the Boodes, and the African-born Rebecca. Rebecca's story reveals how hard some owners fought to hang on to their human chattels in the last days of British slavery, and what this yielded them once abolition came. On 3 February, 1832, Rebecca made a statement in Demerara that she had been unlawfully held in slavery by the Boode family for the past 45 years.²⁵⁰ She had come to the colony on the slaver *Vaderland Getrouw*, under a Captain Verschuur, and during the crossing had become his sexual partner. After arriving in Demerara, she gave birth to his child, a light-skinned boy named John. By virtue of an agreement made with Verschuur, she was freed. But the Boodes persistently claimed her and her children as their property. When Rebecca pleaded her case in 1832, it was not the first time she had approached the authorities. Twice before she had sought to have her freedom sanctioned. For the Boode family, the stakes were high. If Rebecca were to be declared free, her children would have to be freed as well, four of whom were still enslaved on *Cornelia Ida*. Apart from losing their claimed property, the owners would also miss out on any compensation for them once slavery was abolished.

In 1832, Rebecca had a stronger case than during her earlier attempts. On this occasion one Jacob Boode, a former slave of the Boode family who had known Rebecca on the *Vaderland Getrouw*, had been manumitted in 1819 and was now a retired soldier of the British West India Regiment, declared that her story was true.²⁵¹ Sweda – a former concubine in the Boode household, also now free – backed her account as well. And her supposed owners were unable to produce any deeds proving that they had purchased her. They could, however, show that Rebecca was registered as a slave in their plantation's records and also pointed to the fact that they had won previous cases she had brought to court. In the end, Rebecca and her children failed again to have their freedom recognised. The power and influence of the slave owners ensured that the abolition laws worked in their favour rather than in Rebecca's. In 1836, Duker and Luden received compensation for their share of the 207 slaves on *Cornelia Ida*, including Rebecca and her

children. The compensation amounted to *f* 24,499.72. Luden acted as agent for all the recipients, drawing up the receipt for their payments. Overall, the British compensation scheme was viewed positively by Dutch plantation owners. British abolitionists, however, would later express regret about the arrangement because elsewhere, especially in the Netherlands, it became a reason for postponing abolition on the grounds that the national treasury lacked the funds required for such a substantial disbursement.²⁵²

Financial ruin after the Java War and the Belgian Revolution

During the reign of William I (1815-1840) there were occasional calls for the abolition of slavery, or at least for measures that would lead to its gradual disappearance. However, the political, administrative, and financial situation in the Netherlands was deteriorating to such an extent that the subject eventually disappeared from the policymakers' agenda. William's authoritarian style of government resulted in a crisis in 1828-1829. In the south of the country, the predominantly Roman Catholic majority of the population refused to accept the king's growing hold over ecclesiastical organisations, and liberals had enough of the government's violations of civil liberties. Together, these two groups mobilised against the central authorities and organised mass petitions. This political crisis culminated in the Belgian Revolution and the disintegration of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1830. The uprising also led to unrest in the economy of the West Indies; it was only three years since DNB banknotes had been introduced as legal tender in Surinam. The Particuliere West-Indische Bank (Private West Indies Bank) brought this cash into circulation and was always supposed to have bills of exchange to their full value available in the Netherlands. It soon turned out, however, that more money was being drawn on the bills than was being transferred, resulting in the bank losing its authority to discount them.²⁵³ Meanwhile, De Nederlandsche Bank experienced a general upturn in business in the early 1830s.²⁵⁴ However, the king stubbornly refused to formally accept the secession of the southern Netherlands and this led to a costly policy of perseverance (*volharding-spolitiek*). For example, he kept the army mobilised right up until finally recognising Belgian independence by signing the Treaty of London in 1839. In addition, William repeatedly ignored parliamentary calls for greater insight into the government's finances.

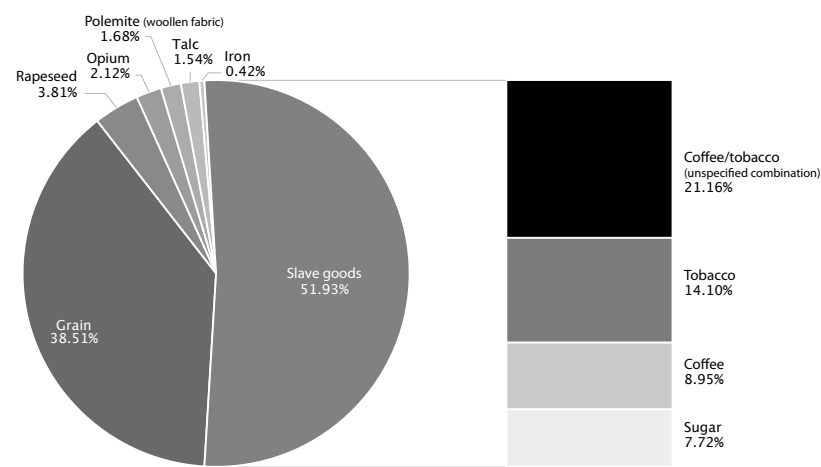
One of the big costs about which parliament was kept in the dark was the colonial budget. The Java War (1825-1830) ruined whole swathes of that island, the most populous and productive in the East Indies archipelago, in terms of both human suffering and financial damage. William entrusted Johannes van den Bosch with the task of turning Java into a profitable region once again. Like the king, the former Commissioner General of Surinam and the Dutch Caribbean had an all-embracing vision of colonial administration. During his time in the Caribbean he had designed the statutes of government for Surinam and reformed the banking system in all the colonies.²⁵⁵ Van den Bosch feared the flight of capital that he observed in both Asia and “the West”. In both regions, profitable companies needed to invest in steam engines in order to increase agricultural production and retain international investors. In his view, producers should preferably grow profitable crops like sugar and indigo for the world market. Colonial companies in the Dutch East Indies faced a shortage of labour, making it relatively expensive in those areas where enslaved workers could not be used.

Van den Bosch introduced the so-called cultivation system (c. 1830-1870) to boost the supply of colonial goods to the Netherlands. This forced rural villagers on Java to use one-fifth of their farmland for sugar, indigo, and coffee production in order to meet an imposed quota for sale to the government at fixed low prices. The Netherlands Trading Society (*Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij*, NHM) then disposed of this produce on the world market, much to the chagrin of trading houses and ship owners in Rotterdam and Amsterdam.²⁵⁶ Just one year after the introduction of the new system, the East Indies recorded a modest budget surplus of f200,000. As the amount increased year by year, the Dutch state came to rely more and more upon these revenues.²⁵⁷ The supply of colonial goods increased as a result of the cultivation system, and some were pledged to DNB as collateral for loans. As shown in Figure 1, the bank accepted consignments of ten different commodities with a total value of f708,980 as security during the 1833-34 financial year. The largest single gage in this period was made on 18 March, 1834, when G. Varkevisser secured credit worth a total of f150,000 against a consignment of coffee and tobacco. In all, slavery-related goods accounted for more than half of the gages pledged that year.²⁵⁸

Not until after William I abdicated (1840) did the full extent of the havoc he had wreaked with the national finances become clear.²⁵⁹ As a result of

the policy of perseverance and military campaigns in the Dutch East Indies, public expenditure far outstripped revenues and overdue payments. In that same year, Floris Adriaan van Hall published a *Proeve van een onderzoek over de schuld van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden* (Report of an investigation into the national debt of the Kingdom of the Netherlands). By writing this, he had followed the advice of his father-in-law, Jan Bondt.²⁶⁰ Van Hall argued that the “artificial secrecy” imposed upon the Dutch public finances in the first half of the nineteenth century was an important cause of the persistent deficit. Year after year, the king had been forced to take special measures in order to make the annual budget appear to be balanced. Since 1822 he had used the Amortisation Syndicate (Amortisatie Syndicaat) for this purpose, a personal treasury full of borrowed money that he could spend at will, beyond parliamentary scrutiny. His abdication also meant the end of this money-guzzling financial instrument. When its statement of income and expenditure was published after his death, it became clear that the government had to add another f4,488,523 to its budget deficit of f17,152,000 for the years 1841-1843. At the same time, the government initiated a fiscal consolidation, which would take years to complete. Henceforth, the Ministry of Finance would administer all debts incurred by the Kingdom of the Netherlands. By exchanging high-interest debt as far as possible for low-interest debt minister Van Hall averted national bankruptcy. The poor state of Dutch public finances put an end to the first cautious steps towards the abolition of slavery.

Figure 1. Goods pledged against DNB loans, 1833/34 financial year.



Borski remains financially involved, but publicly aloof

Those involved in slavery and related businesses had every reason to look after their own interests. Enslavement was far from over in the 1830s. On 1 February, 1832, a balance sheet was compiled in a near-illegible hand of the investments made by Johanna Borski in the Dutch colonies.²⁶¹ The sheet listed ten “Akkerboom shares”, one “Livonia share”, f 7,000 in “Surinam Van de Poll”, f 3,000 in “Surinam Deutz”, f 8,000 in “Clifford Chevalier” and twelve other holdings in Dutch colonial estates, sixteen in all. In this document, Borski’s Dutch colonial investments were valued at a total of one guilder. With little or no active trade in shares in plantation mortgage funds at this time, that was not an unrealistic figure. Borski acquired another seven colonial shares – four in the plantation *Providence* and three in the *Sobre* fund – from J. Blijdesteijn in 1832, for just one guilder.²⁶² What these investments did yield, despite their low book value, was dividend payments. On 31 July, 1832, the “distribution” on fourteen *Changuion* bonds was f 700. In most years the proceeds of the colonial securities were a few hundred guilders, but in 1836 the dividend payments on the fourteen *Changuion* shares worth f 5,250 generated total proceeds of f 7,388.50. In 1839, a 3/358th stake in the plantation *De Hoop* and 5/576th of *Nieuw Amsterdam* in Surinam were the primary contributors to a total yield of f 3,634, thus pushing up proceeds that year. Between 1832 and 1848, “colony securities” generated f 18,618.38 for the widow Borski. Under a separate heading, the ledger also mentions her *Zeezigt* plantation bonds; these yielded f 12,000 between 1840 and 1847. The “securities taken over”, those Borski had bought from J. Blijdesteijn for one guilder, produced f 175 in “distributions” between 1833 and 1839.²⁶³

Moreover, Borski did not confine herself to the Dutch colonial territories. In her portfolio, we also find “Tobacco from St Thomas”. This is now one of the US Virgin Islands, but in the nineteenth century it was a Danish plantation colony where tobacco was one of various crops grown using enslaved labour. Sales of this commodity earned the widow f 6,726.01 between 1832 and 1834. Proceeds from loans to plantations on the Danish islands added another f 990. Sales of coffee in 1832 and 1833 yielded Borski f 32,944.13. This is many times more than her income from “Batavia goods” from the Dutch East Indies, which generated a total of f 2,653. The widow also owned shares in the West Indies Company, but these never yielded any profit and their value on the balance sheet only decreased each

year. Her stake in the NHM proved considerably more lucrative; it paid out *f*31,676.38 between 1832 and 1842. The bulk of her portfolio, however, comprised loans to public authorities. Under the heading “American Funds”, these include almost *f*300,000 lent to the US federal government. But we also find loans to individual states such as Louisiana (approximately *f*800,000) and cities like Mobile, Alabama (approximately *f*60,000), and Pensacola, Florida (approximately *f*50,000). Although these were not direct investments in slavery, indirectly slave labour contributed in large part to their collateral. After all, the agricultural economy in the southern US states, in particular, was very much built upon enslaved labour. The link between money and slavery was often very explicit on banknotes. A \$10 banknote issued by the Central Bank of Alabama in the nineteenth century, for example, leaves no doubt as to where its value comes from: the dominant image is a somewhat idyllic depiction of an enslaved labourer harvesting cotton.

Based upon the amounts listed above, Johanna Borski earned at least *f*38,334.39 from slave labour between 1832 and 1848. Indeed, the actual amount could be as much as *f*70,000 if it were to be established beyond doubt that the coffee she traded in came not from the Dutch East Indies but from a slave plantation in the Atlantic region. Although this was a substantial sum of money – *f*70,000 in 1847 had a purchasing power equivalent to about €650,000 in 2020²⁶⁴ – for Borski it represented only about 1.5 per cent of her total assets of more than *f*4,000,000. She invested most of that capital in domestic and foreign government bonds, some of which were also financed indirectly by slave labour. It is hardly surprising that she did not speak out publicly against slavery, then, but it is striking that we do not find her name on any of the pro-slavery petitions discussed later in this chapter either.

People or property? The battle over the status of enslaved people

The difference between Britain’s fairly precipitate abolition of slavery and the political culture and process in the Netherlands could hardly have been greater. In the Netherlands, aversion to abolitionism was intertwined with the conservative “anti-revolutionary” philosophy which pervaded Dutch politics. Although it was acknowledged more or less grudgingly that slavery should be abolished, it was always emphasised that this could

only happen step by step and that the enslaved populations in the colonies were not yet ready for it. The non-conformist religious movements which had fuelled the abolitionist message in the United Kingdom did not speak out in the Netherlands. Although lively previously, the debate on the issue had died down by the 1780s.²⁶⁵ Nor did the uproar in Britain over a major slave revolt in a former Dutch colony give rise to any principled political discussion in 1823; there was only concern that the rebellion might have turned “Demerara into a second St Domingo [meaning Saint-Domingue].”²⁶⁶ Moreover, the 1830s saw the Netherlands experience a series of national crises, leaving little room on the political agenda for a topic as sensitive as the abolition of slavery.

Despite this, Dutch slave owners and others with a stake in the system began preparing for possible abolition in the late 1820s. And not without reason. From time to time, William I and those close to him took measures which made it apparent an end to slavery was in the offing. When Johannes Van den Bosch was sent to the Atlantic colonies to implement administrative reforms, he made an important change in the status of the people enslaved there. Article 117 of Chapter 8 of his 1828 Regulation on the Policy of the Government of the Dutch West Indian Possessions (Reglement op het beleid der Regering van de Nederlandsche Westindische Bezittingen) reads as follows.

The slaves shall, with regard to their daily treatment, in respect of their owners be considered as *underlings* of their *curators* or *guardians*, in whom shall be vested the right to exercise a paternal discipline over them, but against whose maltreatment all public authorities shall be obliged to guard and to ensure that the law designed in their interest shall be strictly enforced; the unjust principle that in law they may be regarded merely as *chattels* and not as *persons* is hereby definitively abolished.

This provision represented a watershed in the legal status of the enslaved. Under the Roman-Dutch legal code, up until then they had been classified as goods, not people. Not surprisingly, the plantation managers – and by extension their representatives and other interested parties in the Netherlands – were extremely displeased by the measure. They therefore organised principled resistance against it. Unfortunately, the original

petition they compiled has been lost and we therefore have been unable to establish whether any prominent DNB officials were among its signatories. Given what we know about later petitions, though, that would not be surprising.

The interested parties that signed the petition were successful. As a result of the lobbying, the article quoted above was dropped from the revised regulations of 1833.²⁶⁷ This meant that from then on, enslaved people could again be treated as chattels. In practice, a “middle way” seems to have been found in which enslaved people were sometimes regarded as persons – for instance, when they had committed an offence for which they were fined by the government – but in other cases, such as when determining the value of a plantation, they were still considered property. In 1848, the owners wrote a lengthy memorandum to the Minister of the Colonies, Jules Constantijn Rijk, in which they stated emphatically that they considered an enslaved person to be “in law vis à vis his master, an object, a possession – a movable and, as one calls it in law, a self-moveable property.”²⁶⁸ The first report of the State Commission for Slave Emancipation (*Staatscommissie voor de Slavenemancipatie*) also shows that the owners used the deletion of Article 117 as an opportunity to treat the enslaved people in this way in legal proceedings. In response to the question “To what extent does the rule that the slaves are objects, not persons, still apply?”, the answer was that, under all laws, “the slaves are always considered objects.”²⁶⁹ The fact that the enslaved were counted as goods does not mean they appear in DNB records as collateral for loans.²⁷⁰ But the change to the Regulation is crucial in understanding why, for Dutch officials and those with interests in slavery, its abolition was viewed as a business transaction which had to be settled “fairly” according to the property laws of the day.

Not long after this successful opposition to the reclassification of the enslaved as people, full abolition suddenly reappeared on the political agenda. Britain’s abrupt decision to end slavery displeased those stakeholders in the Surinamese plantation economy living in the Netherlands. In a joint letter to William I on 25 June, 1833, they requested that he send military reinforcements to Surinam. Amongst the signatories were the DNB non-executive directors Marcus Broen, Insinger & Co, and Jacob Hendrick Luden, the father of bank director Johannes Luden. Their concerns boiled down to this: “The measures incited by the Parliament of England in order to obtain, across the wide extent of that nation’s West Indian colonies, the complete emancipation of the negro slaves on the plantations situated

there” were causing the signatories “great apprehension for their private interests as well as those of Dutch trade in general.”²⁷¹ The current military presence in Surinam was far too small, because the king only had to “know the character of the negroes to a slight degree ... to be convinced how little is needed to make them pursue, in their mad and frenzied urges, that which they have learned to understand is desirable and attainable; so that if the passion to be free or to be called thus, is accompanied by the possibility of obtaining this object of desire, but a slight inducement is sufficient to bring the entire slave population of the colony to uproar within a short time.”²⁷²

This petition shows once again just how much the British Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 vexed Dutch stakeholders in Atlantic slavery; amongst them DNB directors Huydecoper van Maarsseveen and Luden, both of whom were actively involved with the issue because of their holdings in British colonies. But the call for the military reinforcement of Surinam shows that other DNB officials also sought to exert political pressure to defend enslavement and to make potential abolition by the Netherlands work to their advantage. In the years 1834-1836, the issue of emancipation would not be raised again by the government, but those with interests in Dutch slavery made their voices heard in the 1840s.²⁷³



Detail from a diorama of the Zeezicht coffee and cotton plantation in Surinam, Gerrit Schouten, c. 1815-1821.

Source: [NG-1983-1], Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Stirrings in Amsterdam

As Minister of the Colonies between 1840 and 1848, Jean Chrétien Baud found himself embroiled in conflict with Amsterdam slave owners and other interested parties opposed to abolition.²⁷⁴ In his view, the States General had alluded to a forthcoming emancipation in its response to the king's speech of 1841. This shift in the political mood in The Hague did not go unnoticed by the slave owners of Amsterdam, either. They first tried to make known their wishes regarding slavery policy through petitions to the minister and the new king, William II. In 1844-1845, the focus of the dispute shifted to the performance of the governor-general of Surinam, Burchard Joan Elias. Fierce attacks from the owners prompted Baud to prevent Elias amending the slave laws in 1845.²⁷⁵ These petitions are particularly important to the history of DNB's involvement with slavery because they were signed by several individuals and firms with links to the bank.

We have managed to trace fifteen separate petitions and similar petitions concerning the abolition of slavery, submitted by a variety of firms and other interested parties between 1841 and 1862. These do not include a number of personal letters sent by Insinger & Co, although their contents are also discussed below. We investigated all the signatories in an effort to establish whether they had any association with DNB, either commercially or in a managerial capacity. The number of signatories per petition ranged between 30 and 48, in varying combinations; in all we counted 112 individual names, although it should be noted that on occasions people signed on behalf of others, in their absence. In total, those 112 persons placed 563 signatures on petitions against policies proposed or already being pursued with regard to slavery in the West Indies. A number of these signatories had direct links with DNB: Johannes Luden (d. 1836-1864), Marcus Broen (n. 1823-1850), Jacobus Hermanus Insinger (d. 1844-1871), Wilhem Willink junior and the firms Hodshon & Son, Determeyer Weslingh & Son, Insinger & Co (n. 1817-1823), Luden & van Geuns, Broen & Co, Goll & Co, Bunge & Co, Ketwich & Voomberg, and Gebroeders Hartsen. From 1860 onwards, Ferdinand Rendorp (d. 1845-1865) signed several petitions as representative of the shareholders in the company Weduwe J.S. van de Poll. No indications have been found that any of these parties signed in a capacity directly associated with DNB.

A.M. De Jong ranks Determeyer Weslingh & Son (founded 1765), Goll & Co (1777), and Ketwich & Voomberg (1790) amongst the leading trading houses to survive in the nineteenth century by conducting buying and selling on their own account or by elevating what had originally been a secondary activity, dealing in bills of exchange and securities, to become their core business.²⁷⁶ Determeyer Weslingh & Son and Dirk Jan Voomberg were amongst the major initial investors in DNB who attended its first meeting of shareholders on 17 August, 1814.²⁷⁷ The signatory Wilhem Willink junior had no formal association with DNB but, as a member of the Amsterdam City Council, had consulted its then president, Jan Hodshon, and director Jacob Fock I in 1824 about William I's desire to revive the Wisselbank.²⁷⁸ The firm Gebroeders Hartsen signed one petition and would have liked a connection with DNB; in 1868 one of its partners, Pieter Hartsen, was one of the two candidates for a vacant directorship of the bank. On 19 May, however, the general meeting of shareholders elected Nicolaas Gerard Pierson (d. 1868-1885), by 391 votes to 189.²⁷⁹ Both Willink junior and Gebroeders Hartsen thus had only marginal connections with DNB, but their names do appear in De Jong's classical study on the bank's history and so they should be mentioned here as signatories of pro-slavery petitions. Our inclusion of Hodshon & Son also requires explanation. Jan Hodshon (d. 1814-1816, p. 1816-1827), a prominent figure at DNB in its early years, was long dead by the time his successors at the family firm signed one of the petitions we are discussing here, but he was heavily involved in that business during his term of office and so we believe the firm's signature is relevant and worthy of mention.

We were able to ascertain which services DNB provided to some of the signatories. In the second volume of his history of DNB, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Bank*, De Jong provides extensive information on discounters in the period 1852-1864.²⁸⁰ They were holders of bills of exchange who sold them to DNB after deducting interest over their residual term to maturity.²⁸¹ The banking firms Determeyer Weslingh & Son and Goll & Co were important clients for DNB; they appear in its accounts in twelve separate financial years, discounting amounts ranging between f2.1 million and f2.8 million per year. More modest in size, but still important for DNB, were Luden & Van Geuns and Bunge & Co. They were trading companies and during this period discounted more than f1 million annually with DNB.²⁸² Albert van Geuns, a partner in Luden & Van Geuns, became royal commissioner of DNB in 1864. This was a

position created by the 1863 Banking Act (Bankwet), which obliged Van Geuns to attend the meetings of the bank's shareholders and non-executive directors as well as the joint meetings of the board and non-executive directors.²⁸³

The period 1841-1862 reveals what was at stake for the government when it came to the issue of slavery and DNB's involvement with it. To gauge just how seriously the political establishment in The Hague took the petitioners from Amsterdam, we need to bear in mind the economic significance of DNB, of the capital's trading houses, and of their commerce in colonial goods during those years. The bank's revised charter of 1838 had allowed it to increase its registered capital and the bank did exactly that by issuing new shares worth *f*5 million to existing investors in April 1840. Its consultations with the non-executive directors on this matter show that the growth of trade and industry in particular, due especially to "the favourable development of agriculture in our East Indian possessions", had increased the need for money.²⁸⁴ In 1845, the year in which the conflict between Baud and the slave owners reached a climax in the States General, the total amount discounted at DNB exceeded *f*100 million. This activity became popular after the founding of the *Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij* (NHM).²⁸⁵ So what was happening in the colonies at the time certainly was relevant to DNB policy, but this primarily concerned the Dutch East Indies.

Between 1844 and 1848, DNB was involved indirectly in the reorganisation of the national debt and the switch to the silver standard. Regarding the first of these, legal consultant Jan Bondt wrote several letters to his son-in-law, Floris Adriaan van Hall, who as Minister of Finance was responsible for the debt restructuring. Through a controversial parliamentary bill, he succeeded in considerably reducing the budgetary pressure of the national debt. Amongst other things, this involved raising a "voluntary loan" to the government worth *f*127 million at the low interest rate of 3 per cent. Private investors signed up to the tune of *f*117 million in all, inhabitants of Amsterdam with interests in slavery prominent amongst them. Against this backdrop it is understandable why, in response to an 1845 petition to the House of Representatives from that same group, the MP Jan Karel van Goltstein referred to them as "estimable residents of the capital, heads of substantial trading houses."²⁸⁶ Because of their willingness to subscribe to the loan, he considered them "conscientious dischargers of their civic duties, and disposed in times of need to be of service to the state by all

means.”²⁸⁷ In 1846-1847 the state budget was once again in balance, thanks mainly to revenues from the East Indies.²⁸⁸

Signature hunt and verbal fireworks: the development and content of the petitions

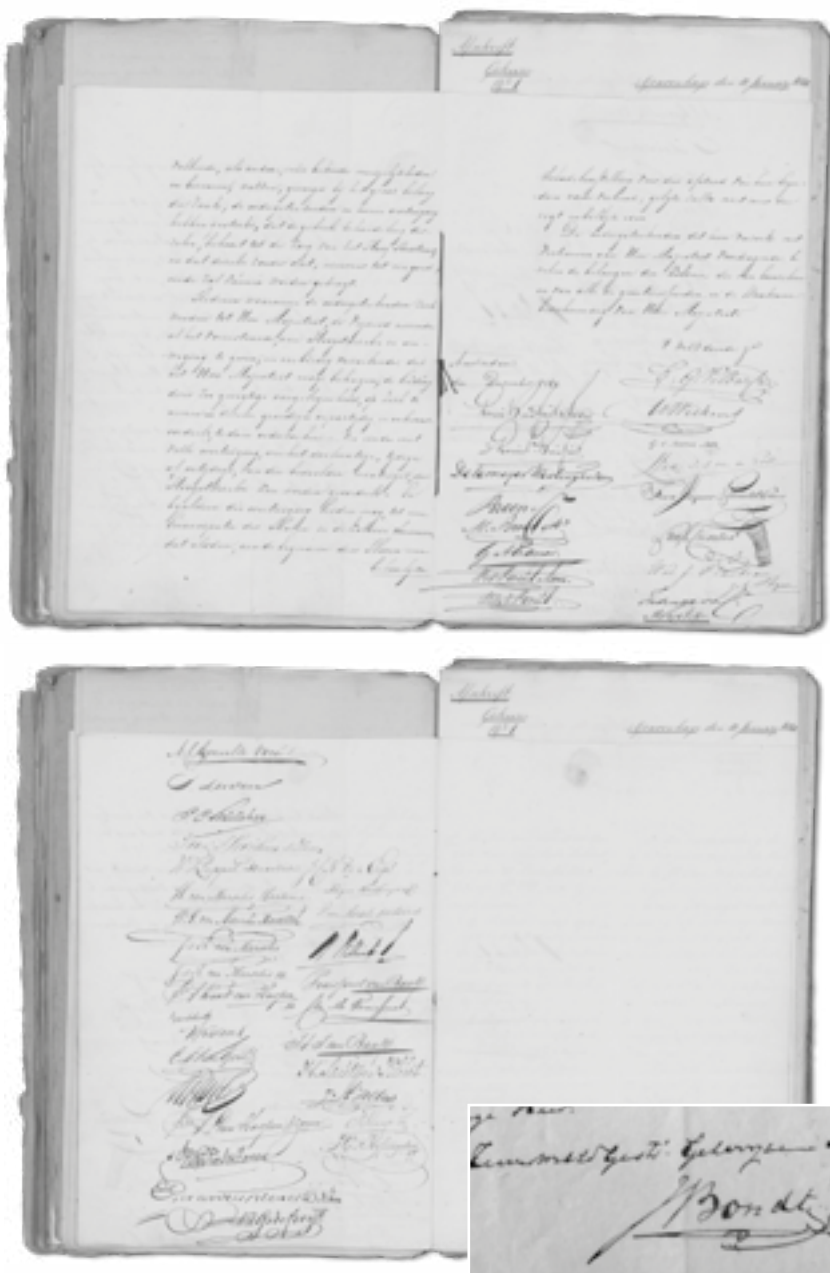
Now that we have a picture of the signatories and the broader political and economic context, the time has come to take a closer look at the immediate reasons why these petitions appeared, what arguments the authors used, and how the Dutch government reacted to them. Rumours that a society was to be founded with the aim of abolishing slavery prompted several prominent Amsterdam merchants to write to William II in December 1841. On their petition we find the signature of DNB director Luden (d. 1836-1864), whilst “J. Hodshon” is probably the son of former bank president Jan Hodshon (p. 1816-1827); both his brother and his son were already active in the firm Hodshon & Son in 1814. The other signatories associated with DNB are the firms Insinger & Co and Broen & Co, as well as Determeyer Weslingh & Son, headed by legal consultant Bondt (1814-1845). The signature in that company’s name is clearly in his hand. Marcus Broen Mzn (n. 1823-1850) signed in a personal capacity, whilst someone else did so on behalf of Broen & Co. Marcus was the son of a merchant trading with Surinam and head of Broen & Co.

Compared with later petitions, this one was short and concise in its appeal to the king. As mentioned, the immediate reason for its submission was the establishment of “an association or society ... having as its aim the emancipation of the slaves” in Surinam.²⁸⁹ For three reasons the petitioners asked William “to take charge of this matter of so great an importance.”²⁹⁰ That it was essential firstly for peace and security, secondly for the prosperity “of the entire fatherland”, and thirdly because an issue coupled with such “great difficulties” should not be the responsibility of particular persons or a separate society, but “belongs to the concerns of the high administration of the nation.”²⁹¹ The government should investigate whether the time was right for emancipation. And if it was, then according to the petitioners the government should devise the means “by which, in the event that the measure in question be implemented, adequate compensation will be provided to the owners of the slaves to be emancipated.”²⁹² In this first address to William II, those with interests in

slavery thus clearly delegated responsibility for what they would consider a “just” emancipation to the Dutch government. From the outset, the key term for the owners and investors was “proper compensation”.²⁹³ The signatories did not oppose potential abolition per se, but they did remind the king of the complexity of the matter and the fact that, as legitimate owners of property in the colonies concerned, they expected to see their interests represented in the decision-making process. The petition had the desired effect, because the king accepted the arguments presented: this matter belonged in the hands of the government. His Minister of the Colonies, Baud, subsequently decided to investigate the necessity of abolition at his own pace.²⁹⁴

A new rumour in 1843 prompted a new petition. This time the catalyst was speculation that the government was deliberating about the introduction of a new Regulation governing the enslaved and their treatment in Surinam. The petition was signed by the firms Luden & Van Geuns, Hodshon & Son, Goll & Co, Insinger & Co, and Ketwich & Voomberg – all associated with DNB, as well as by Luden personally again. The petitioners desired “that the Government be pleased *beforehand* to make use of intelligence from the owners and interested parties combined, in order that a regrettable experience not prove *afterwards* that the lack of such intelligence had led to great and irreparable errors.”²⁹⁵ The document provided two specific reasons for such advance consultations. Firstly, it claimed, interference by the government in the management of the enslaved in Surinam constituted a violation of the right of ownership, which could not be forfeited “without adequate compensation [...] whatever the philanthropic spirit of the age may judge.”²⁹⁶ Secondly, any standardised measure taken by the government would fail in Surinam because of the “so very varied condition and nature of the plantations” there.²⁹⁷ The signatories believed that only by acquiring prior knowledge of the local situation the authorities could draw up good new regulations for the government of the enslaved.

Baud did not respond to this submission, so at the end of October he received a second petition from Amsterdam. In this the signatories claimed that “reports being received at the present time by many of the undersigned ... testify to the unrest already prevalent in the colony and the dangers threatening that possession.”²⁹⁸ In particular, measures introduced by the new governor-general, Elias, “in no way respect the legitimate rights and authority of the masters over their slaves”.²⁹⁹ Rather, they displayed “a desire more heartless than benevolent to honour philanthropic ideas



Signatures on a petition of 1841 and (inset) Jan Bondt's signature from another letter, showing that he signed this petition on behalf of Determeyer Weslingh & Son.

Source: NL-HaNA, 2.10.01, inv. no. 4277, exh. 11 January, 1842.

at the expense of the individual owners”³⁰⁰ and were intended “to perturb the colonists in their lawful ownership [and] to reduce still further the already very low value of their securities.”³⁰¹ Of the 48 signatories on this occasion, Luden ex officio and the firms Insinger & Co, Determeyer Weslingh & Son, Goll & Co, Hodshon & Son, Luden & Van Geuns, and Ketwich & Voomberg all had personal or commercial links with DNB.

Because Gijsbert Christiaan Bosch Reitz’s signature appeared first on the petition, he received Baud’s reply with the request to distribute it further. In his response, the minister clearly passed the buck back to the discontented Amsterdam trading houses. “In the case of slavery,” he wrote, “one can no longer consider as satisfactory the guarantees with which one used to be content.”³⁰² In 1842, the government had sought to give the owners the opportunity to improve the management of their enslaved labour force themselves, so that the interested parties would not give the impression that they were only willing to make changes because of new legislation. And earlier in 1843 Baud had corresponded at some length with Bosch Reitz about another recurrent problem in Surinam: the shortage of circulating means of payment, especially paper money. According to the minister, that exchange had made it abundantly clear that Bosch Reitz was trying “to persuade the Colonial Department to increase the bank notes [in circulation] with a new issue of f 60,000, entirely in his own interests.”³⁰³ Having refused to undertake overseas activities since 1826, DNB played no part in this problem. But it recurs time and again as a banking issue in the Amsterdam-West Indies-The Hague triangle and is therefore an important factor in understanding the dynamics of the Amsterdam petition movement. How Bosch Reitz “is able now to put himself at the head of a petition in which the Colonial Department is maligned in the most extreme manner and accused of having done nothing for Surinam, and being willing to do nothing, can be explained only by the grievous disappointment which he, in making a fine speculation, experienced due to the minister’s refusal.”³⁰⁴ So read the pithy sentence with which Baud put down Bosch Reitz’s new-found role as standard-bearer for Amsterdam’s trading houses to a personal grudge against him as minister.

The response from the capital, dated 25 November, 1843, was considerably longer than the first two petitions. It was the first such document to refer directly to the publication of 31 August, 1784, the legal basis for the plantation owners’ “domestic jurisdiction” over their property in Surinam.³⁰⁵ The writers expressed their distaste for “the system of scrutiny, which at

this moment prevails in Surinam.” By this they meant “investigations into the conduct of the owners” with the possibility of “charges and prosecutions.”³⁰⁶ Such activities, they explained, would “create in the minds of the negroes an unrealistic expectation [...] and put not only the rights, but even the safety of the owners at risk.”³⁰⁷ As emancipation became a real prospect, their petitions grew in length and the compilers introduced more historical documents in support of their arguments.

Although the Amsterdam signatories were in a strong position with regard to the historical and legal basis of their rights, the outcome was far from being a foregone conclusion. Baud subsequently received a letter from Paramaribo, signed “G. N.” – possibly Adriaan David van der Gon Netscher, formerly a planter in British Guiana – and reacting to the latest missive from what the writer calls “that coalition” with a perhaps surprising tenor. This correspondent advised Baud “to pay no regard to the addresses [petitions] from the gentlemen of Amsterdam.”³⁰⁸ They involved deception of various kinds. For example, the authors had “misled a number of the signatories, who have nothing to do with our colony.” Only now, “at last”, were they “better acquainting themselves with the persons to whom they have entrusted the protection of their interests in this country [Surinam].”³⁰⁹ If those gentlemen really valued the growth prosperity of Surinam, G. N. mused, why did they not end their opposition “to our desire to have a free port and market here?”³¹⁰ And if they had really “donned their armour and girded their weapons for the safety and the lives of the inhabitants of Surinam, between their number of 40 or 50 why do they not raise the relatively small sum of three million Dutch guilders to save the colonial money from further depreciation?”³¹¹ The letter ended with two remarks intended to undermine the force of the signatures. Some of the gentlemen, it was claimed, had signed only as a favour to others, whilst the author had also espied with regret the names “of people who have numerous obligations to the present government of Surinam.”³¹² In short, those in Amsterdam with interests in Surinam’s slave economy represented anything but a consensus in their attempts to influence colonial policy in The Hague.

Baud immediately capitalised on this letter’s dagger blow to the resistance he was encountering from Amsterdam. With so much of the discontent about his colonial policy concentrated in the capital, he thought it “not unlikely” that William II, too, “will be approached by the Surinam petitioners.”³¹³ He therefore felt it appropriate to send the king a note

making two key points that he “might well use” should any interested party contact him directly.³¹⁴ The first complaint they were likely to raise, according to Baud, was that he had not given them an opportunity to consult with him prior to the adoption of the new slave regulation. This regulation governed the system of slavery and the treatment and status those who were being enslaved. But any complaint from Amsterdam on this point would be unfounded because the regulation was still being drafted. The second objection was more delicate, since it concerned “the unseemly animosity of the petitioners, [which] was not followed by the government.”³¹⁵ Baud pointed out to the king that, “even as they are moving heaven and earth to pit the House of Representatives against [your royal] prerogative, their ships are being underwritten by the Colonial Department.”³¹⁶ Their reliance upon government business was something “the repositories would do well to appreciate.”³¹⁷ It was important for Baud that those concerned acknowledge that neither they nor parliament controlled the colonies, but the king. During his ministerial term, Baud would come to personify this old-style attitude towards colonial administration.

As Baud had predicted the petitioners set their sights on William II after their attempts to influence him had proven fruitless. In 1844, the minister received a number of letters from his secretary that offer a good insight into the background to the latest round of petitions and how the government viewed them. In August, for example, he was informed that Broen and Hodshon – both directly or indirectly associated with DNB – together with Bosch Reitz, Wilkens, Gülcher, Marselis, and Le Chevallier, were seeking an audience with the king. But with both William and his adjutant absent from The Hague, the minister’s secretary “feared disappointment” in obtaining “the desired audience before the king’s departure for Germany.”³¹⁸ Meanwhile, the outcome of a meeting of plantation owners and administrators held on 1 July, 1844 would “keep alive the unrest that continues to exist amongst the W. I. [West Indian] owners ... and incite renewed *démarches*.”³¹⁹ This observation proved absolutely correct, because in October and November the West Indies trading houses again submitted petitions to both the king and Baud. And again, these prompted no action on the part of the government.³²⁰ Evidently, according to Baud’s secretary, the petitioners were convinced that “their interests will be pressed all the more, and the advocacy thereof by the government will follow more quickly, when their representations are supported in writing by all those interested in the prosperity of the colony.”³²¹

This confidential correspondence from Baud's office about the petitions from the Amsterdam trading houses contains crucial information about the involvement of DNB directors Insinger and Luden, and DNB-related Bondt and Goll & Co. Before such a petition went to the king, it seems there was a veritable hunt for signatures. Whilst up to 48 trading companies did put their names to these documents, this number was not considered particularly high.³²² It was not primarily the number of signatories that really mattered, but rather the social standing of the individual merchants and firms appending their signatures. From a copy of a letter dated 25 January, 1845 written by Amsterdam's mayor, Pieter Huidekoper, to Minister of Finance Van Hall, we learn quite a lot about the attempts made to prevent representatives of Amsterdam's leading mercantile businesses from signing another petition. And in it we also find mention of several DNB officials. "Our mutual friend, Mr A. F. Insinger," had informed Huidekoper that a lawyer named Van den Embde was urging its signatories "to submit the new address, which also includes the constitutional question."³²³

Insinger had spoken with Rodolphe le Chevallier of the firm J.J. Poncelet & Son and with Egbert Gerrit Veldwijk, and "both had said that they would not sign the document." Moreover, Insinger "would see to it that Mr Van de Poll is also so persuaded."³²⁴ This confirms that Insinger had good connections with others in Amsterdam with interests in Surinam and that the government made use of his authority to temper their criticism of its colonial policy. Finally, Huidekoper dropped Van Hall a hint whereby he confirmed Jan Bondt's involvement with the campaign of petitions. "The previous address" he wrote, "was signed by Determeyer Weslingh. That, I believe, can be prevented in the future by taking Mr Bondt in hand."³²⁵ This is an important sentence for DNB's historical association with slavery, because it establishes that Bondt was indeed responsible for signing the petitions on behalf of his company. Turning the tables, the time had now come for Van Hall to advise his father-in-law – rather than the other way around, as over the national debt – on the policy the government should be following. Although it is also possible that Bondt's death on 8 January, 1845 led Determeyer Weslingh & Son to not sign any more petitions.

Despite his efforts on the minister's behalf, mayor Huidekoper also took the opportunity to explain why he could understand the dissatisfaction, even amongst moderate colonial investors, with governor-general Elias' actions in Surinam.

It is apparent to me that the owners of the W[est] I[ndian] plantations are ill at ease about the state their possessions are in. The moderates say that the uncertainty regarding the government's intentions with regard to the emancipation of the slaves worries them; and they say that the actions of Governor Elias are the reason for this and that intriguers are now making improper use of that anxiety.³²⁶

We find a specific example of this broader dissatisfaction with Elias in Amsterdam in an incident recorded in the minute book for the cotton plantation *Zeezigt*. This also illustrates the direct involvement of DNB director Insinger in the management of such holdings. As directors of *Zeezigt*'s mortgage fund, Insinger and his brother Albrecht Frederik look after the interests of its British owners, the heiresses Catherine and Johanna Cooke. In May 1843, they requested that the Insingers "apply to His Majesty by petition in order to make an attempt to obtain leave, upon the basis of all that is mentioned therein, to close *Zeezigt* and to sell the negro labour family by family".³²⁷ Rather than following this instruction to the letter, the Insingers instead wrote to Minister of the Colonies Baud and subsequently arranged a personal interview. In a written reply, Baud said that he had read the request made by Insinger & Co, but that his department could not grant an exemption from the Surinam government regulation without having heard governor-general Elias on the matter.

Since it is apparent from the recently conducted interview that they will be satisfied with a recommendation concerning their interests to [Elias], such a recommendation is being sent this day [and] shall certainly have the effect that the interests of the applicants will be upheld as much as is possible.³²⁸

In short, Baud informed Elias that he saw no objection to the Insingers' wish to liquidate *Zeezigt* and to sell off its enslaved workforce in family groups, even though this ran counter to the regulations then in force.

Baud's belief that his intervention would persuade Elias to make an exemption to the rules for the Insingers proved mistaken. The governor-general felt that "the slaves of the plantation *Zeezigt* were too numerous" to be sold by force without inciting violence. Their likely resistance, he wrote, would derive from a combination of "their familial relations with

the slave force on the nearby plantation *Dageraad*” and the detrimental effects on their health of “moving negroes from a cotton plantation on the sea coast to sugar plantations.”³²⁹ For these reasons, Elias turned down the Insinger brothers’ request. Actions such as this caused consternation amongst those in Amsterdam with interests in slavery in Surinam and the Caribbean. In the words of his predecessor, Julius Constantijn Rijk, “by the recklessness of his actions with regard to the slaves” Elias brought “a hornet’s nest about his ears amongst the pinch pennies of Amsterdam.”³³⁰ This insight into the Insingers’ plantation management activities also helps us understand why their family firm put its name to the petition complaining about Elias in 1844. In their eyes, he had personally thwarted their interests in Surinam – far more so than Baud, who had at least indicated initially that he had no objections to the liquidation of *Zeezigt*.

Despite this disappointing result for the Insingers in their attempt to win Baud’s favour, with yet another petition in the offing Albrecht Frederik made a fruitful tour of Amsterdam’s leading trading houses to dissuade them from signing. This latest petition, dreaded in government circles, was sent to the House of Representatives although with a noticeably different set of signatories. No DNB directors and none of the notable trading houses had signed this time. Yet former non-executive directors Broen & Co and Goll & Co, the latter now a major discounter of financial instruments, as well as Luden & Van Geuns had all signed this petition again.³³¹ At the time this changed set of signatories was noticed and not entirely attributed to Insinger’s influence among shareholders in slavery. “Notwithstanding all the efforts made and the fact that they had put their signatures to previous documents worded in dubious terms,” Baud was informed, the signatures of Jan Hodshon and Jan Luden and of Insinger & Co, Determeyer Weslingh & Son, Wilhem Willink and other interested parties were missing.³³² One possible reason for this, he was told, was that they had been informed that the House would “declare itself incompetent in this matter” and instead refer it to the minister.³³³ For a party of any stature, that was “all the more reason not to shoot his powder in vain.”³³⁴ According to the informant, moreover, there was a logical explanation as to why Goll & Co had signed: “The head of the house of Goll and Co has been lying sick in his bed for a good five weeks, so the gullible Goll has taken charge of the business. Without these circumstances, I do not believe that this house would have signed.”³³⁵

Apart from a few leading bankers and major banking houses, the petition contained mainly lesser-known names. In a separate note, Baud received background information “provided by an Amsterdam trading house.” This revealed “which signatories to the address present themselves falsely as having a great interest in Surinam.”³³⁶ Most were stockbrokers and had no private property in the colony. Amongst them were also an associate of Broen & Co and a confidential clerk at Hodshon & Son. On 1 March, 1845, Baud’s contact in the capital wrote that he had heard that “many of the signatories to the address must have been carried along with the current, whilst others are dependent entirely upon the whims of their administrators in Surinam.”³³⁷ Even brokers and owners of ships, and workmen too, had had petitions put before them. Amongst these subordinates, “some démarches had already been undertaken ... at many houses verily without success, and by many subordinates they were viewed with reticence, whereby they would have refused steadfastly to sign were they not compelled to do so by their private interests.”³³⁸ This latter statement, in particular, gives us the impression that the stream of complaints set in motion by a few trading houses was not to the liking of everyone with interests in the West Indies. It is not inconceivable, for example, that Wed. W. Borski was one of the major trading houses which refused to add its name to the petition to parliament. Those individuals who did sign, moreover, might not have done so had their personal circumstances made them less dependent upon one of the firms backing the initiative.

All in all, Insinger’s intervention at the government’s behest helped to ensure that the first petition submitted to the House of Representatives represented a rather mixed bunch of people and businesses. “Besides the ringleaders of the opposition in this matter,” Baud’s informant told him, “and with the exception of a few trading houses, the majority of the signatories to the address are not the ‘crème de la crème’; and there are even some *very mangy ones* (an Amsterdam expression) who, under these circumstances, are glad to fish in troubled waters.”³³⁹ Rather than the most respected trading houses, it was those with a more dubious reputation who were seeking parliamentary assistance. As for the remaining signatories, they were “all howling like money-hungry wolves” desperate to lap up “the final dregs from a treasure chest of which they feign to see the bottom.”³⁴⁰ This intelligence from Amsterdam was vital to Baud in honing his riposte to the petition before parliament.

When it reached the House of Representatives in February 1845, the petition sparked a fundamental debate about the balance of power between the monarch, his ministers, and the legislature. The petitioners, after all, had invoked their constitutional right as citizens to put their grievances to the government. Liberal MPs seized the opportunity to argue that parliament should be given a greater say in colonial policy; effectively, they decided that it was more important to highlight government failures by backing a petition from a few dozen disgruntled wealthy citizens in Amsterdam than to examine whether what these men were actually seeking chimed with humanitarian liberal principles. This explains why its consideration ended up as a debate about Article 59 of the Constitution, setting out the balance of power among the king, ministers, and parliament with regard to the colonies. Because of the political priorities of those MPs, the issue of emancipation was drowned out by a tug-of-war over constitutional and colonial matters.³⁴¹

Anyone who questioned the extensive formal executive power of the Dutch administration in the colonies had a problem with Baud. In a speech of unprecedented ferocity for the time, he gave the Amsterdam trading houses a piece of his mind from the floor of the House.

They are outraged that the government has refused to sacrifice the Governor-General summarily to a conspiracy by a few colonists, as deplorable in its purpose as its means. They want to see his recall endorsed by a vote of Honourable Members, and at the same time the system of oppression and indefinite slavery perpetuated! They scream against the autocracy exercised with the pen, in order to allow that which has the whip and the Spanish buck as its instruments to exist unhindered with the approval of Honourable Members! See, Honourable Gentlemen, what the petitioners really want but have not expressed openly in their address to you.³⁴²

Baud's contact in Amsterdam later informed him of the impression his speech had made in the capital. People there, he said, doubted "whether this is the way a minister should defend himself against complaints about his administration, even when they are made in less courteous terms. From the mouth of one of the honourable members, this would have caused no

sensation; but from the mouth of the minister it is not generally endorsed. A speech so vehement, moreover, will result in a reply no less vehement.”³⁴³ That came on 8 April, 1845, submitted by the Amsterdam petitioners, leading to the establishment of a parliamentary committee of inquiry. On the one hand, this delivered a scathing verdict on Elias’ performance, finally leading to his dismissal that his critics so craved, but on the other it condemned the way in which the liberal minority of MPs had exploited the petition in an attempt to force a reinterpretation of Article 59. By so doing, they had “even deliberately cast a veil over the persistence of unlimited slavery, which was concealed within the opposition by the petitioners.”³⁴⁴ With these words, the committee aligned itself with Baud’s condemnation of the true purpose of the petition from Amsterdam.

Baud’s speech also hit the mark as regards the open involvement by the Insingers and others in the petition movement. They objected the coalition formed by liberal MPs and the shareholders in slavery. This was precisely why Insinger, Le Chevallier, and Veldwijk had not signed the petition to parliament: in their opinion, “it would do nothing but harm to further their interests by raising issues concerning the present constitution.”³⁴⁵ The Amsterdam lawyer and slave owner A. Brugmans wrote to Baud in January 1846 to say, somewhat smugly, that this conviction was gaining ground amongst the “Surinamese gentlemen” in the capital. Brugmans himself had “suffered some repudiation on their part since, from the very beginning, I disapproved of their conduct and outright called it foolishness and indecency.”³⁴⁶ The tactical use of the Amsterdam petition by the liberal MPs had embarrassed its signatories, “now that numerous amongst them seem to appreciate that what they thought concerned only their colonial possessions had become a rocket to [...] be fired at reform of the Constitution.”³⁴⁷ Brugmans believed the parties concerned had come to realise they had gone astray. And he told Baud about their eagerness to know how they could discuss their interests with the minister without being rejected out of hand. Brugmans was not the only one from Amsterdam who unofficially sought contact with the government, either. Baud’s permanent secretary, George Severijn de Veer, received repeated visits from “the gentlemen of Amsterdam [...] probably for the purpose of establishing a rapprochement as an intermediary.”³⁴⁸ Behind these approaches, he believed to have “observed a desire to now support the measures taken by the Government.”³⁴⁹ A partner in Broen

& Co, for example, had “asked to be allowed to inspect the [slave] regulation, then he would hear the gentlemen of Amsterdam unofficially and endeavour to bring them to uniformity.”³⁵⁰

These letters reveal a clear shift in the relationship between the government and the Amsterdam lobby. It was a thorn in the side of the leading trading houses that their interests in the West Indies had been seized upon by liberal MPs in order to press home their own desire for constitutional reform. These firms only wanted to see their property protected, an objective which had faded into the background once it was overshadowed by the political struggle for greater parliamentary control over the colonial administration at the expense of William II and Baud. Meanwhile, on the government side, important insights were emerging about the context in which they placed the issue of slavery. During this period, Baud and Rijk, the former governor-general of Surinam, conducted a fairly intensive private correspondence in which they discussed political developments in The Hague through the lens of their administrative experience gained at the two extremes of the Dutch colonial empire. Rijk wished Baud:

patience and forbearance with that fatal Surinam, that world in a box, where the turmoil is, as you once said, *une tempête dans une verre d'eau* [a storm in a teacup]. I wish you had a good man there now, because with interests as overwhelming as the East Indies I can quite understand that you must loathe having so much entanglement with those unfortunate West Indies & *vous n'êtes pas à bout* [and you are not finished yet].³⁵¹

The other side of the coin: Willem Cornelis Mees

The trading elite of Amsterdam, home to DNB, was clearly less than receptive to anti-slavery voices during these years. The fact that Willem Cornelis Mees from Rotterdam was an outsider is only reiterated by his particular role in the abolitionist movement, which was conspicuously absent in the capital in the early 1840s. In 1842, he received a letter from a friend saying that he tried in vain, at Mees' behest, to find support for “the good cause” in Amsterdam; like Mees before him, he had simply been ridiculed. The plantation directors were determined to cast abolition in a bad light. “The greatest evil, however, appears to lie in the mocking

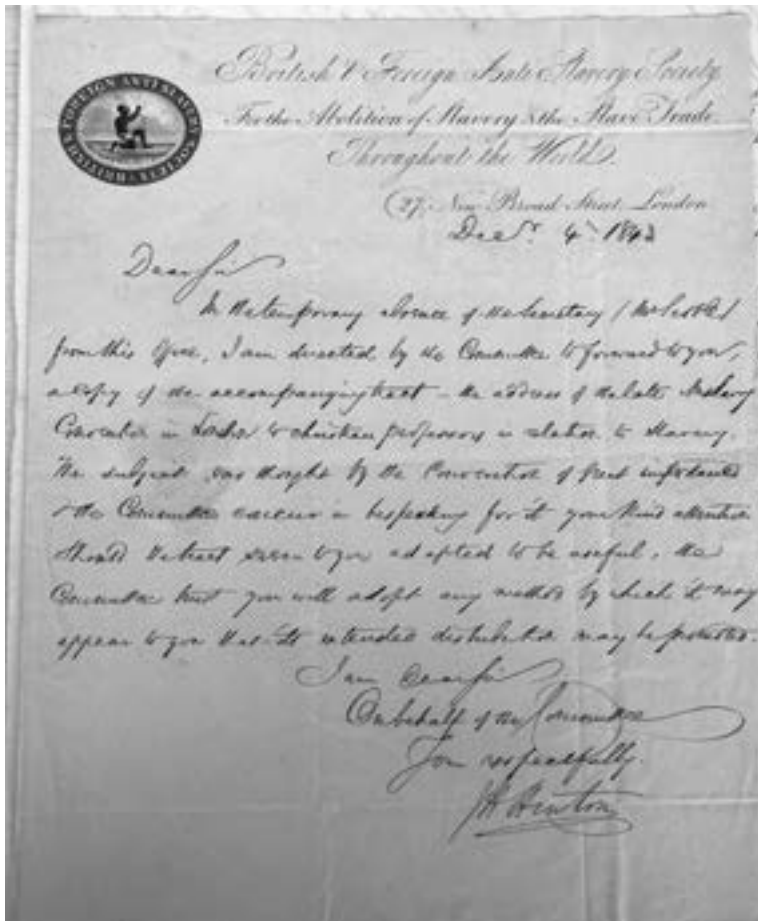
cheer of the people of Amsterdam, who simply display no inclination to join a society that is derided.”³⁵² Mees himself corresponded regularly with those people from the 1830s onwards, about monetary matters and the history of banking he was writing, but wisely kept quiet about slavery.³⁵³ Nonetheless, he played a significant role in the revival of the abolitionist movement in the 1840s.

During the first decades of the nineteenth century the abolitionist movement had been in a sorry state, but was now set for a comeback thanks in part to Mees. Although there had been widespread opposition to slavery in Europe in the late eighteenth century, the years of revolution had dampened that enthusiasm. The time for social experiments had passed. Even in a major city like Rotterdam, it proved nigh on impossible to set an active campaign in motion; no-one there seemed capable of taking the lead, or willing to do so once the old abolitionist fervour had subsided. In polite society, standing up for an unfashionable cause risked damaging one's reputation. So those who did still believe in it took no action, meaning Mees was an exception. In his personal correspondence, he analysed the possibilities for the creation of an active abolitionist organisation, and in 1838 he helped draft a first petition to the king.³⁵⁴ That was probably never sent, but Mees remained active. From the early 1840s onwards, he threw in his lot with various anti-slavery movements, including a fledgling Rotterdam Committee (Rotterdamsch Comité) set up in the wake of visits by abolitionists from the United Kingdom. Its core membership was drawn from the city's British community, plus a few members of the local bourgeoisie.³⁵⁵ Abolitionism in those years was an international affair, with the British playing a prominent role. They had a network of contacts all over the world, who encouraged both ordinary citizens and public officials to advocate abolition in their own country or empire. Mees kept in touch with the secretary of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, at whose behest the Rotterdam Committee was established.³⁵⁶



Willem Cornelis Mees.

Source: [104082],
RKD Netherlands Institute
for Art History.



Letter from the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society to W. C. Mees.

Source: NL-RtdSA, Mees family archive, access 39, folder 438.

Along with several others, Mees assumed responsibility for the Dutch campaign and remained in regular contact with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in London. No definitive membership lists or minutes from the Rotterdam Committee have survived, but it is apparent from the various addresses and petition lists found in the archives that Mees was at the heart of this group for some time.³⁵⁷ Creating a unified national movement proved an uphill struggle. Maartje Janse describes how the small and ideologically diverse groups established in different cities had trouble adopting one clear standpoint and forming a united front.³⁵⁸ They were more concerned with the theological and philosophical arguments

in favour of abolition and what exactly it would entail than with the tactics needed to actually achieve it in the political arena. A protracted debate between the anti-revolutionary (protestant) Réveil movement and the liberals long hampered the effectiveness of the Dutch campaign. Mees realised how problematic this situation was and most of his abolition-related letters are devoted to the discussion in 1841 and 1842. Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer of The Hague wanted to set up an exclusive society rooted in the Dutch Reformed church and opposed the dissenting principles being propounded in Utrecht by his uncle, Jan Ackersdijck, and his friends. The abolitionists in Rotterdam, Ackersdijck's cousin Mees included, sided with those in Utrecht. Ackersdijck attached great importance to this alliance and in 1843 he tried to encourage Mees to take on a leading role: "First, however, we would like to hear from Rotterdam; that being where it first began, it would be most appropriate for those gentlemen to have the honour of standing at the top. This we would greatly desire."³⁵⁹ Mees was not satisfied with the stability of his own committee. His correspondence with Ackersdijck bears testimony to the committee's instability, explaining why Mees became the central contact person in Rotterdam.

The abolitionists needed to overcome a considerable ideological divide in order to create a united front against slavery. Opinions differentiated between those who stressed thorough preparations and calm proceedings, and those who found principles sufficient as base for prompt abolition. Groen van Prinsterer's faction regarded Christianisation as a precondition for abolition, whereas Mees and his Rotterdam group believed "that one should not aspire to half-measures, that religious and civilising education of the slave is wasted in vain conceit, that one should first emancipate completely and that then the education of the negroes will follow of its own accord, by missionary societies etc."³⁶⁰ In other words: abolition now, without further delay. The idea that Christianisation and preparatory education were essential preconditions for manumission was rejected out of hand. The proposed society should focus only upon abolition itself and upon spreading information about slavery, the colonies, and how emancipation had taken place in the British empire. The petition to the king must also propagate these ideas.

Although there was still fundamental disagreement about the best way forward, the abolitionists eventually realised the need to cooperate. Conversations between Ackersdijck and Groen van Prinsterer resulted in a desire to set up a society on a more inclusive footing, with religious beliefs

relegated to the background. What mattered was enabling supporters to rally around "the good cause", as Ackersdijck repeatedly called it.³⁶¹ From early 1842 onwards, the liberals started to solicit as many signatories as they could find in Utrecht, Amsterdam, The Hague, Leiden, and Zwolle for their petition to the king.³⁶² In the end, there were 125 signatories. But when the petition was presented by the liberal MP Edmond Willem van Dam van Isselt in May 1842, the response was unsympathetic. William II was not favourably disposed towards the society and, together with Minister of Justice Cornelis Felix van Maanen and Baud in the Colonial Department, took steps to limit the abolitionists' influence. By reacting in this way, William effectively accepted the entreaty made in the rival petition submitted from Amsterdam a few months earlier, in December 1841, that abolition should not be entrusted to a "separate society."

Whilst the government in response to the petition by Mees and his allies did promise improvements to the lot of the enslaved, and accepted that slavery would end at some point in the future, it produced no actual plan or timetable. Dejected by this reversal, the anti-slavery campaign again began to lose impetus.³⁶³ However, shortly after the lukewarm royal reception for the petition Mees penned a spirited letter showing he was not prepared to give up, unlike the rest of the committee in Rotterdam. He admitted to his uncle that to say "our committee is slumbering is only too true [...] At its last meeting, the committee decided to let the matter rest for the time being, until we might learn something more about the measures mentioned by the government."³⁶⁴ The petition's lack of success made it evident that "the good cause" would have to be pursued in another way.

Ackersdijck, like Mees, was not prepared to abandon the cause, and, after consulting with his cousin, came up with the idea of publishing an anti-slavery periodical. "Matters must regularly be exposed to the light," he wrote. "There must be correspondence. Proposals must be made to the government, until there is certainty that they will do something."³⁶⁵ Ten months later they were still discussing the project, but had now found more supporters. The journal would take the place of the society, which was still not up and running. Ackersdijck claimed their attempts at founding an organisation were hindered, but establishing a publication with subscribers would in fact be an organisation in all but name. He asked Mees what he thought of the plan and whether he would like to talk about it in Rotterdam.³⁶⁶ Mees discussed the idea with his local associates and also

received encouraging words about the plan through his British contacts.³⁶⁷ Ackersdijck appreciated Mees' opinion and kept asking him for his views regarding the journal. On its draft list of backers were 24 names from Rotterdam, including Mees' father, Rudolf Adriaan, and his brothers Adriaan and Rudolph. The others were the "hard core" of the city's abolitionists, who had also signed the earlier petition.³⁶⁸ By the end of 1843, the time was ripe for a broad agreement on the publication's statutes, content and number of sponsors, so the journal – entitled *Bijdragen tot de kennis der Nederlandsche en vreemde Koloniën, bijzonder betrekkelijk de vrijlating der slaven* (Contributions towards knowledge of the Dutch and foreign Colonies, especially concerning the emancipation of the slaves) – began to take shape.³⁶⁹

Mees proved an active co-publisher, providing the editorial board (of which he was never a member) with numerous articles about the anti-slavery movement. In addition, following up his earlier efforts with the petitions he remained active in writing to new co-publishers. Drawing on his ever-expanding network to do this, his activities were not limited to Rotterdam.³⁷⁰ Through his Amsterdam connections, Mees also tried to find more supporters there. He used his network to collect copy about the colonies and about emancipation that was available nowhere else in the country or was too expensive for the editors in Utrecht. He also went to the trouble of persuading his contact at the recently founded *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* to back the abolitionist cause. In January 1845, he wrote to Ackersdijck that "the chief writer of that newspaper ... has told me that I may list him amongst the persons mentioned as publishers of our journal ... He will soon be a complete abolitionist and can then support the good cause in his newspaper."³⁷¹ Mees' activities did not go unnoticed in Amsterdam, but the colonial lobby there never suspected his involvement. "Who is writing those articles in the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*?" they asked themselves.³⁷² The answer was a conundrum, but they did know that "a lot of material was sent from here" and who its editor was.³⁷³ "To what extent he is assisted by others" remained shrouded in mystery in the capital, though.³⁷⁴ The people involved in Amsterdam thus knew some of the material being published originated in their city, but not that Mees was behind it.

Active as he was behind the scenes, Mees refrained from speaking out in public – perhaps for fear of damaging his reputation with a section of his bourgeois peers. As his biographer summarises it, he viewed the

“uncertainty of his future as a threat rather than a challenge.”³⁷⁵ Mees was reluctant even to collect signatures in Rotterdam: “hesitancy about playing a double role kept me from doing so,” he explained.³⁷⁶ In letters to his uncle he stressed that he was preoccupied with other things, and his interest in economics was his principal reason for maintaining the correspondence. “I work a lot, but I have so many things to do that I am always in a hurry and have no time for anything really.”³⁷⁷ His activities for *Bijdragen* coincided with his first steps in mercantile administration. In 1843, William II appointed him secretary of the Rotterdam Chamber of Commerce. But he did occasionally make the connection between his activities for that body and the large-scale slavery in the Dutch colonies. When a debate arose over which colonial produce (should) receive(d) favourable tax duties, Mees stated: “It does seem that nowadays Java sugar is considered to have been produced without slave labour, but as long as slavery exists on Java there is always a sound reason to remove the Java product from the preferential list.”³⁷⁸

In late 1843 or early 1844, several members of the Rotterdam Committee travelled to London to attend a meeting about emancipation. Mees ensured that the first issue of *Bijdragen* contained a report of that visit.³⁷⁹ He and Ackersdijck consulted on such invitations and proposals from London as “delegates” of their respective branches of the movement.³⁸⁰ From 1844 onwards, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society began pressing for a new petition but that idea was rejected in Utrecht. More had to be done first to arouse public opinion on the subject.³⁸¹ At the end of that year, the Rotterdam Committee was invited to an anti-slavery meeting in Paris, but both Mees and Ackersdijck were unable to attend.³⁸² Besides the British abolitionists, Mees also corresponded with the Africa Society (*Société d’Afrique*) in France. Almost every letter between him and his uncle referred to documents sent by those groups. Their so-called “anti-slavery reporters” were at first meant mainly for information, but from 1843 onwards they fed into the content of the journal.

In the public arena, many of the most outspoken anti-slavery activists were women. They also proved hugely important to Ackersdijck’s plan to translate so-called “slave narratives” into Dutch. These were testimonies by people who had lived in slavery but escaped, often from the Southern United States to the North. For example, Mees was asked to arrange a translated edition of the life story of Frederick Douglass. Ackersdijck encouraged him in this endeavour, and together with A. S. Rueb, Ackersdijck’s

right hand man in Utrecht, he was indeed able to compile and print a Dutch version of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.³⁸³ Sales of this work, like those of *Bijdragen*, proved disappointing, however, and the organisation's financial problems began to break down the committees. In 1846 there was only minimal correspondence between Ackersdijck and Mees, and by the beginning of 1847 it seemed that the Rotterdam committee had once again dissolved. By contrast, the *Rotterdam Ladies' Anti-Slavery Committee* was thriving and had been supporting *Bijdragen* financially for some time. It had also been willing to pay for the printing of Douglass' memoir.³⁸⁴ Mees had good contacts with these female campaigners, who proved significantly more inventive and active than the men.

Publishing a periodical remained a struggle, but Mees continued to encourage the editors.³⁸⁵ When new plans to petition the king began to crystallise, he supported the initiators from the wings.³⁸⁶ In one of his final letters to Ackersdijck dealing with the subject of emancipation, Mees pleaded for a public gesture in which he would again play an active organising role, albeit in the background. "When a gesture is needed and I can here show an address already bearing distinguished names from elsewhere, I shall make every effort to obtain an unimaginable number of signatures. For people here are very much in favour of reform. We lack only suitable chiefs."³⁸⁷ Mees' exertions undoubtedly contributed to the fact that the next petition, in 1848, counted numerous members of his own family amongst its signatories.³⁸⁸

After a decade of steady progress, in about 1848 the abolition debate was stalled by the financial aspects of emancipation. How would compensation be arranged? How much would it be? Mees did not take part in this discussion and henceforth turned his attention to more official matters, such as the system of coinage in the Dutch East Indies. Although never in the campaigning spotlight, behind the scenes he was an active, consistent, and benevolent member of the anti-slavery movement for ten years. His ideas, put into practice by his uncle Ackersdijck, gave Mees considerable influence in the public debate. His most important contribution was the contacts and exchanges he facilitated between various individuals and groups, including the British activists in Rotterdam and London. Numerous articles, sources, pamphlets, and ideas were shared through these channels. Despite being so preoccupied and not considering his involvement in the anti-slavery movement as one of his major projects, Mees very clearly devoted considerable time and effort to the cause. He

also kept himself constantly up to date, reading widely on slavery and disseminating that literature.

In 1848, Mees was at a crossroads in his career. In his letters to his uncle, he expressed concern that he had yet to find his purpose in life and was therefore failing his family. The legal profession failed to bring him the fulfilment he sought, leaving him uncertain about his future. Earlier in the year it seems that he was interested in taking up a professorial chair at Leiden, but missed out on the appointment. Somewhat resentfully, he remarked that the position had instead gone to Johan Rudolph Thorbecke (see Chapter 4), “even though he is not an economist; but his name sounds so good that cannot be a hindrance.”³⁸⁹ Later in the year he was sounded out as a potential minister of Finance, but declined the opportunity.³⁹⁰ “Did they not approach you?,” he enquired of Ackersdijck. “I would consider that such a fine plan: you and Sloet in charge of Finance and the Colonies, me as secretary or in some such position (if well remunerated) working with you both. Sloet the excitable horse, me the placid draught animal and you the driver.”³⁹¹ Plagued by indecision, yet again Mees did not dare take up the reins even though this position could have given him an opportunity to promote abolition from inside the government.

Instead he continued with his existing occupations, giving more lectures and focusing on his scientific work.³⁹² In March 1849, he was invited to become secretary of De Nederlandsche Bank. He again asked Ackersdijck for advice, then weighed up his options. Mees disliked Amsterdam and would rather not have to move his family there, and he found the circle of traders he would be joining far from agreeable, but the salary and the relative freedom he would enjoy in the evening hours eventually persuaded him.³⁹³ Ackersdijck understood his decision, but pointed out that the academic route was still open to him. In the letter giving his advice, he wrote, “I consider it highly probable that you will soon become a professor.”³⁹⁴ During this turbulent political period, emancipation disappeared as a topic in the two men’s correspondence. Their letters now were devoted solely to family matters, Ackersdijck’s declining health and, from 1849 onwards, Mees’ new position at DNB. The heady momentum of 1848, the year of European revolutions, would not bring about the end of slavery in the Dutch colonies, mainly because the government stumbled over the question of how to organise compensation. Willem Mees, meanwhile, remained reluctant to speak out publicly in favour of abolition and he signed no further petitions to the king during his tenure at DNB.³⁹⁵