

CHAPTER EIGHT

A NEW DESTINY FOR CEYLON 1798-1805

8.1 *Transition to Crown government*

From the outset, the island of Ceylon's place in the British Empire was a peculiar one. It was described above how Ceylon was conquered by the deputies of the East India Company in Madras, but at the initiative of Henry Dundas in his function as the Secretary of War.⁴⁵⁰ In the first instance this meant that the Company claimed the annexed territories on the island and governed it from the presidency of Madras. The position of the government in London and particularly of Henry Dundas concerning this entitlement changed in 1797. Although the peace talks in Lille were inconclusive, the British government had placed a strong claim on its possession of Ceylon during the negotiations and the conviction that it should be hold on to it grew firmer. The joint interests of the state and the Company in the territories of Ceylon resulted in a dual Crown-Company government. The government of the colony fell under the charge of a governor appointed by the Crown and thus the formal sovereignty lay with the Crown, but at the same time the Company was responsible for the actual administration and the revenues.⁴⁵¹ In practice, the government of Ceylon fell under the responsibility of the new governor-general, the Marquess Richard Wellesley, while the civil servants were recruited from the Madras presidency. Therefore, in many ways Ceylon functioned as another presidency within the East India Company's government of India.⁴⁵²

The newly appointed governor, Frederick North, has earned an interesting reputation in the historiography. His immediate successors were full of criticism regarding his government and most historians have shown little sympathy for the man. The positive evaluation of North's government started in the late colonial period, when local historians wrote enthusiastically about his attention to the educational and Christian establishments on the island. North's governorship is often characterized as one of good intentions and bad luck. The war with Kandy certainly did not reflect well on his administration, and it is often used to explain his failures.⁴⁵³

In this chapter the focus will be on the interaction between North and his superiors in Calcutta and London, and the plans that were made for the role that Ceylon was to play in the arena of the British Empire. At the

same time, attention will be paid to the way Frederick North shaped his government and dealt with the legacy of his immediate predecessors and the Dutch rulers. This means that we shall not only focus on the institutional development, but also on North's interpretation of the system of indirect rule. The key to successful governance, after all, lay in the relationship between government and the native establishments.

8.2 *Pacification of the remaining Dutchmen and judicial reformation*

Frederick North was appointed in March 1798 and sent to Ceylon in a rush, without instructions from Secretary of State Dundas. He arrived in Bombay in June 1798 where he awaited the instructions from Dundas and only moved to Ceylon at the end of September 1798. North had a strong inclination towards Governor-General Wellesley, and corresponded privately with him during the whole term of his government. Their letters largely deal with the military operations in the East and the advances and defeats of Napoleon in Europe, but especially in the first years, North also wrote a lot on the situation on the island and expressed his ideas on government.⁴⁵⁴ While waiting in Bombay he was anxious to get started on the island, and in his letters to Wellesley he reveals a sense of drama when he writes about his "embryo government" and "my little island of cinnamon".⁴⁵⁵ He also expressed his worries about working together with the Madras servants who were already involved on the island's government and he had a ready opinion on the preceding affairs over there:

Of the actual state of that island, I can give you little information. You have heard by this time of the disturbances which had been occasioned by the hasty reforms in the Dutch method of administration, which I remember, we both supposed, before I left England, but too likely to produce them.⁴⁵⁶

Not much later North received his instructions in which it was decided that he was to follow the advice of the De Meuron committee and revert to the Dutch system of taxation and management of inland affairs. Consequently, he was ordered to set up a well organized revenue department. North absolutely agreed with these instructions and praised the work of the committee. He was also ordered to look further into the judicial matters, which had been much neglected, and he had to set up a well functioning and just judicial department.⁴⁵⁷ These were the two major issues at the time of his arrival, with which he commenced energetically. Therefore, the focus of North in those early years was in the first place on the organization of the administration and mainly as it related to the functions of the English servants in the revenue and judicial departments. At that time, he left the native administration as it was and did not much interfere with the headmen system, so the *mudaliyārs* kept the power they had retrieved in the rebellion of 1798.

The courts had hardly functioned in the time prior to his arrival and therefore serious action in the judicial departments was required. Although he originally wished to organize the department in the same manner as the Dutch had done, he soon changed his mind and made some major changes. One of these was paying judges proper salaries, to prevent bribery. He also curbed the powers of the native chiefs in judicial matters and those of the fiscal, who had had too much power invested in him.⁴⁵⁸ Following the example in Bengal, North installed a supreme court of criminal jurisdiction with full jurisdiction over the maritime provinces. This court consisted only of European servants. Civil courts in the towns of Colombo, Galle, and Jaffna were re-established, and the *landraden* were now in charge of all civil cases in the countryside. However, courts of appeal were installed to hear the appeals from these civil courts. The higher and lesser courts of appeal consisted of the governor, commander-in-chief and the chief secretary. The organization of the judicial department did not deviate much from the former Dutch system, but the implementation differed. Judges were now salaried and political and juridical power were disconnected as far as possible.⁴⁵⁹

In the meantime, North worked hard to win the trust of the considerable numbers of Dutch inhabitants who remained in the major towns of the island. Many of them had been agitating vehemently against the British when North took up the office of governor and one reason the courts had not been functioning when North arrived was because these Dutchmen refused to take the oath of allegiance to the British Crown, a necessary requirement for entering British service. North realized that he needed the Dutch to get his judicial department back on its feet and he strove actively to appease them. By the end of 1799, most of them, realizing that the prospect of Ceylon returning in Dutch hands was growing less and less likely, decided to take their chance with the British. The death of Van Angelbeek in the same year probably lowered their morale and hastened this process.

Diederich Thomas Fretz, the former commander of Galle, was one of the first to take the oath of allegiance and to take up a job in the civil court of Galle.⁴⁶⁰ This started something of a chain reaction, but it was not to the liking of all Dutch inhabitants. In September 1799, North was confronted with a fight between Pieter Adolf Loffman against Pieter Sluijsken. Loffman had taken the oath of allegiance not long before and had taken up a job in the *landraad*. Sluijsken accused him of being a traitor, and in his testimony he stated:

At the end of our conversation I among other things asked mr Loffman in a jest whether he did not think that our Dutch nation could come again to Ceylon, to which Loffman answered laughing, yes, I long already for them, and if I must then hang, many others will also be hanged. Considering this

as a blumsy [sic] answer, I replied to it with only these words: Here are coconut trees enough.⁴⁶¹

North decided not to reprimand Sluijsken openly for his insults, because of his age and character and because he did not expect his words to have any serious effect. By this time, many of the Dutch had switched to the British service, and Sluijsken's "peer pressure" could not endanger that process anymore.

In the course of his first two years in office North developed an antipathy for the former Dutch government and by the end of 1799 he was cursing its practices in his despatches home. A sense of British superiority was certainly present in these remarks. His critique concerned the unprofessional practices in the judicial department in particular, but he also accused the Dutch government of fraud and an inhumane attitude towards the natives. He abhorred their intolerant religious policy, and almost immediately did away with all restrictive rules against Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.⁴⁶² At the same time he acknowledged the political advantage of the former Dutch practice of attaching the inhabitants to the colonial government through education and religion. Therefore he put a lot of energy into the re-establishment of the Dutch schools and clerical institutions. The Reverend James Cordiner, who later published a lengthy description of Ceylon, was one of the men sent out to work on this.⁴⁶³

North's ambiguous attitude towards the Dutch institutions and former policies did not stop him from developing a fondness of the Dutch inhabitants. He reinstated many of their charitable and clerical institutions and offered those in need an adequate pension. He persuaded many of them to continue in the juridical, clerical and educational profession. He intended to actively educate them and prepare them for the lower echelons of the British civil service, in January 1800 he wrote in a dispatch to London:

The public officers to be provided for Ceylon are remarkably few. The numerous colony of Burghers whom it would be unjust to banish and impolitical to disunite from the state, will give an easy supply to all the offices of inferior nature; were the nomination to those of greater responsibility vested in the governor subject to the control of the governor general in Council, little harm would possibly arise from it.⁴⁶⁴

North further hoped to encourage some of them to engage in agriculture, which would add to the development of the country. North had found in the Dutch the middlemen so much needed for a new government with little knowledge about the island. Thus at this point many of the Dutchmen started to play an important role again at the local level because of their availability, local knowledge and experience.

8.3 *Internal strife and changes in the revenue department*

The revenue department also underwent a major administrative reform, and as in the juridical department, North's new department resembled the former Dutch system in many ways. North installed four collectorates (Colombo, Galle and Matara, Jaffna, Vanni, and Batticaloa) that functioned independently of each other and were under direct control of the governor and his chief secretary. The function of collector was like that of the former *dessavas*, except that the juridical authority was taken away from him. The substructure of the collectorates existed of the native headmen, following the Dutch example. The first *mahāmudaliyār*, in this case Johannes de Saram, was in close contact with the governor and advised him on all sorts of inland matters. As in Dutch times, he also held great authority over the native headmen in the southwest.⁴⁶⁵

Although North changed the organization of the revenue department, the civilian officers from Madras who were in charge of the various regions at first remained the same as they had been under Andrews. Even before he arrived on the island North had expressed his distrust of the Madras officials and within a year after taking up his post he was in a fight with most of them often over the various cases of fraud and mismanagement that came to light. Garrow, the collector of Batticaloa and the Vanni, had abused his authority and treated his native servant in an extremely violent manner. Garrow was dismissed in July 1799 and a commission was sent to look into the affairs in the collectorates. John MacDowall, who functioned as the collector of Colombo and deputy secretary, was suspected of fraud in the organization of the pearl fishery.⁴⁶⁶

A more extensive investigation into the pearl fishery in 1799 led to a revelation of many more cases of corruption and fraud. Hugh Cleghorn and his Lieutenant Turnour were held responsible and were dismissed at the end of the year. One of North's major enemies, Cleghorn had opposed North's judicial reforms in 1798 and tried to discredit him with Wellesley and Dundas. Although North was certain of Wellesley's confidence, he feared Cleghorn's influence with Dundas and the directors in London, and he accused Cleghorn of having planned a kind of *coup d'état* during his absence in Madras in the summer of 1799. The affairs at the pearl fishery eventually made it possible for North to get rid of him.⁴⁶⁷

From North's correspondence with Wellesley it is clear that from the beginning North was convinced of the injudiciousness of keeping the Madras civilians in office. He feared that he could not exert the proper authority over them and therefore did not trust them from the beginning. Within two weeks after his arrival he spoke of "that spirit of clique and party" and his letters to Wellesley in those years continuously address his problems with the Madras civilians.⁴⁶⁸ Although there were actually

serious cases of fraud and misbehaviour, North's attitude towards the Madras civilians can once again be understood in the light of regime change. To North, these men had worked under a regime – British to be sure, but which had totally failed in its operation. Therefore they were contaminated with failure; he did not trust them and he did not want to work with them. By the end of 1799, many of them were replaced by men sent from Bengal or recruited from the military department. Those that did remain in office submitted to North's authority. It was also at this time that North proposed to the Home Office that he be allowed to employ Dutchmen in the civil service.⁴⁶⁹

In the first two years of his term, the problems in the judicial and revenue departments much paralysed the government. In fact, in those first years the finances of Ceylon deteriorated markedly. The pearl banks became exhausted by the intensive and uncontrolled fisheries of the previous years and the fishery had to be suspended after 1799. Moreover, North had misjudged the fertility of the existing cinnamon plantations. Shortly after his arrival he had decided that the four large government plantations in the environs of Colombo and Negombo could produce sufficient cinnamon if taken care of properly and he ordered all other plantations and gardens to be demolished and discouraged the inhabitants from growing cinnamon trees in their own gardens. This resulted in a decline in the cinnamon production which was only partly overcome by sending cinnamon peelers into the Kandyan country. Many of the other sources of revenue had been neglected or mismanaged in past years while at the same time expenses were on the rise due to the reforms in the juridical department, the installation of salaried judges and a general rise in wages. The enormous rice imports from Bengal and Madras were particularly costly. Now that peace and order had returned to all departments, it was time to focus on the economic situation of the British possessions on Ceylon. The renewed spirit of change was instigated by the departure of the Madras civilians, and was reinforced by developments and decisions made in India and London.

8.4 *From bulwark to granary*

The construction of dual government in 1798 resulted in the peculiar situation that the government of Ceylon fell under the authority of two opposites in colonial policy, Secretary of War and president of the Board of Directors Dundas, and Governor-General Wellesley.⁴⁷⁰ Wellesley had arrived in Calcutta in the Spring of 1798. He was a military man and of great importance to the British expansion in India. Soon after his arrival, he set his mind on the overthrow of Tipu Sultan who at the end of 1799

was killed in the famous Battle of Seringpatnam. The defeat of Tipu was of great importance for British security in India, for they had continuously worried about the alliance between Tipu and France. Wellesley remained unconvinced, however, and under the pretext of the French menace he continued to expand the British territories and influence on the Indian subcontinent. In his view, Ceylon played an important part in this effort.

He saw Ceylon as a bulwark of the Indian empire and wished to reinforce it with extra garrisons. In his eyes the strategic function of Ceylon compensated for its limited revenue Wellesley preferred to look at Ceylon from an all-India perspective and argued that Ceylon's finances could be balanced with the income from other regions. It was after all thanks to the possession of Ceylon that those other regions were kept secure. In the winter of 1800, Wellesley decided to assemble an expedition for Bombay at Trincomalee for the protection of the British possessions in India. His brother, Colonel Arthur Wellesley (later Duke of Wellington) was appointed to head the mission and arrived at Trincomalee early in 1801.⁴⁷¹

Dundas on the other hand, was an experienced bureaucrat with a long record of service relative to India. In the 1780s and early 1790s he was involved in the administrative reforms in Bengal. In general, he did not believe in the idea of consolidation of power through aggressive expansion in India. Dundas turned more careful after the defeat of Tipu sultan because in his view the French were now outplayed in the Indian arena. His opinion was reinforced after the defeat of Napoleon in Egypt two years later, which convinced him that the French would not turn to India again. This diminished the strategic importance of Ceylon, although Dundas agreed with the consensus opinion that a French occupation of Ceylon should be prevented at all costs. However, he did worry about the bad financial situation of the colony, and concluded that Ceylon had to become self-supportive.⁴⁷²

As the policies and strategies envisioned in India and London diverged, Dundas realized that a solution had to be found for the dual government that had been installed in 1798. Moreover, the problems with the Madras civilians on the island had made it all too clear that the government of Ceylon needed to be put on a better footing with stronger supervision. At the coming peace negotiations at Amiens, Ceylon was likely to remain British and to be internationally acknowledged as such. On Ceylon, North hopefully expected the government to become a separate dependency entirely under the authority of his befriended Governor-General Wellesley, just as Dundas had promised in 1798. In the meantime, however, Dundas had changed his mind and decided that the island was to fall entirely under the Crown, if it was retained at the peace negotiations in the winter of 1801/02.⁴⁷³

At the same time, both in Ceylon and in London new strategies were devised to improve the financial and organizational situation on Ceylon during the years 1800 and 1801. These strategies were based on different expectations regarding the future position of the island within the expanding British empire and resulted in the development of two schemes that crossed each other on the way from the metropolis to India and vice versa. By the time the two sides received the other's plans, both had already started to carry out their own schemes. In the following sections, both of these will be discussed before the narrative of the actual policies and developments on the island is continued.

8.5 *Dundas' scheme*

The bad financial situation and the serious friction between North and the Madras civilians led Dundas in London to reconsider the existing construction of government in Ceylon. Contrary to expectations in both Ceylon and India, he decided in 1801 to turn the British possessions on the island into a proper Crown colony instead of returning it entirely in to the hands of the East India Company, and after the conclusion of the Peace of Amiens in 1802 this plan was put in practice.

In his despatches to North Dundas explained why he had reached this decision. Ceylon had been conquered for strategic and not for commercial reasons in the first place, but by now the situation had changed. Although it was considered best to keep the island to prevent the French from occupying it, the colony now had to become self-supporting and preferably even profitable to the mother country. He considered the prospects of Ceylon's prospering in the future good, but considering the sorry state of the agricultural sector the colony required investment and active government to achieve a positive outcome. This required civilian servants with the right mindset, which those serving the East India Company did not have. A career in Ceylon was not as lucrative for them as a position in India. Because career prospects on the island were limited, only Company servants of lesser ability would be willing to serve there.⁴⁷⁴

Consequently, Dundas considered it proper to commence with the organization of a separate civil service for Ceylon and he selected twenty-four men to be sent out from London. He did not see much fruit in the role which North had attributed to the Dutch inhabitants, and in fact he wanted North to discourage their service as much as possible.⁴⁷⁵ An agent for Ceylon was also appointed to assist the Secretary of War, and Dundas instructed North to install an executive council to serve him with advice when needed, because he was no longer in a position to ask the governments of Madras or of Calcutta for advice.⁴⁷⁶

In London Dundas had informed himself well on the situation on Ceylon and showed great personal interest in the affairs and circumstances of the island. Central to the new instructions stood the agricultural development of the island:

To restore the decayed Agriculture of the island and particularly to promote and encourage the growth and increase of rice, ought certainly to be one of the first objects of your solicitude in the situation you now hold, and with this view the reparation of the tanks appears one of the first and principal means to which you should have recourse.⁴⁷⁷

The possibilities to increase the revenue from cinnamon production were limited, since five thousand bales was all that was needed for world consumption. Therefore all other lands had to be made ready for paddy cultivation. This emphasis on agriculture was new and contradicted the conclusions that Lord Hobart had reached four years before when governor of Madras. He had stated that cultivation of rice was the last product to yield revenue on the island and advised it to focus on the cinnamon, the pearl fishery and other cash crops like areca nuts. Dundas now advocated the stimulation of the paddy culture as the spear point of the colonial government of Ceylon. This was certainly a change in policy.

Dundas had made sure that he was informed thoroughly on the subject by Lord Glenbervie (alias Sylvester Douglas), who had written an extensive report on all aspects of the government of Ceylon based on North's dispatches and other writings about the island.⁴⁷⁸ He had paid particular attention to the development of agriculture in a treatise entitled "On the Improvement of the Agriculture and Natural Advantages of the Country and the Appointment of a Civil Engineer" and which was sent to North in March 1801.⁴⁷⁹

Glenbervie commenced this paper with "Rice, being the corn of India (which is the first consideration in the agriculture of all countries), I shall treat of here". The importance of rice lay not only in the fact that it was basic foodstuff for the inhabitants of the island, but also that it was an easy good for the government to tax. It was even desirable to make rice the number one source of the island's revenue, instead of cinnamon, because of the limited possibilities of growth in the trade of that spice. The starting point of his argument was the assumption that in former times, the island had functioned as a granary and had never suffered from a lack of rice.⁴⁸⁰

How did Glenbervie propose to achieve this? He first informed his readers that the yield of rice was relatively low on Ceylon, while yields per seed were much higher in Sumatra and Bengal. Therefore, the government should inform itself of the means of agriculture in those regions. Also, waste land had to be given out free from taxation for five years to whomever wished to cultivate it, and the ancient waterworks and reser-

voirs had to be repaired. For this purpose a civil engineer had to be sent to the island. Waterways and roads had to be established for the improvement of communication and transport, for which the “personal service of those inhabitants who hold their lands in that tenure might be very useful and actively employed”.⁴⁸¹ He expected that these measures would eventually result in an annual surplus produce of up to 150,000 pounds. For that reason government should not hesitate to invest some money in the development of the colony. Moreover, he acknowledged the importance of knowledge for government and recommended the establishment of a society “for cultivating and promoting the knowledge of Nature, history and agriculture the useful arts, manufactures and the languages, history antiquities and literature of Ceylon”.⁴⁸²

The spirit of Glenbervie and Dundas are reminiscent of Van de Graaff’s *broodkamer* ideology. The plans for surveying the island and repairing all sorts of irrigation works tally with the Dutch governor’s enterprises. Also the image of a rich past with an abundance of rice on the island is presented here, the difference being that the English blamed the neglect of the paddy culture on the Dutch and the Portuguese instead of undefined natural disasters. Thus, as in the last decades of Dutch rule, the British were drawn inland with agricultural schemes; but this time action was ordered from above in order to safeguard the position of Ceylon within the British Empire. Another crucial difference was that it had never been Van de Graaff’s aim to turn the whole island into a granary, but only to promote the rice culture in the peripheral districts while reserving the southwest for the production of all sorts of cash crops and timber.

Why were Dundas and Glenbervie so keen on rice and why did they not opt for the cultivation of cash crops like coffee or pepper instead? The West Indies already provided the British economy with various cash crops and at the same time the success of Bengal must have been on their minds. The two men reasoned that no major changes in the system of government were necessary to turn Ceylon into a granary. All that was needed was a proper management and supervision of affairs. That is why Dundas instructed North to leave things the way they were in relation to the service tenures, because in his view such changes should be brought about only gradually, and the risks of sudden changes had been experienced by Andrews. He sincerely wished that anything like that would not happen again.⁴⁸³ North’s plan of engaging the Dutch in agriculture was also rejected and in fact Dundas forbade all private Europeans from undertaking any agricultural enterprise. He apparently feared the growth of independent European interest groups, who could in time undermine state authority by requesting self-government as had happened in the American colonies and the Cape Colony.⁴⁸⁴

In many ways Dundas dealt with Ceylon as he had with India. His

instructions for the reorganization of the judicial and revenue departments resemble his proposed reforms in India. His instructions were very important and were to have a long lasting influence. Even the ideal of turning Ceylon into a granary was copied from earlier successes in Bengal. The complex ideological and practical connection with developments in India, Britain and elsewhere in the British Empire characterize the early development of British rule on Ceylon and will be further discussed in Chapter Nine.

8.6 *North's drift*

In his first two years on the island, North had come to the conclusion that the improvement of the island's revenue could only be reached through proper management by capable British servants on the one hand and by a general increase in the agricultural produce on the other. He was of the opinion that in the southwest, the core area of the British possessions, agricultural development was hampered by the inland social and economical structure. Already in his despatches of the end of 1799 he wrote that although he had returned government to the shape it had under the former Dutch system, he wished to make amendments in time. The changes he had in mind actually remind us of some of those implemented by Andrews three years earlier. In his despatches to London that year, North was still careful in his expressions. But at the end of 1799 he sent his confidant Major Davy Robertson to convey his despatches to London, and this man wrote an extensive report regarding the situation on the island and the possibilities for improvements.⁴⁸⁵ The tenor of this memorandum concurs with that of North's despatches, but it is more explicit. The most important element of Robertson's recommendations was the abolition of the service tenures:

The industry of the Cinglese [sic] might be promoted and encouraged by giving them lands to be cleared and cultivated on easy and moderate terms, and then insuring them the permanent property of the grounds that they may have cleared, on tenures either of the *ottoe* or *ande* tributes according to the nature of the soil, and by abolishing all personal services, that degrading and humiliating mark of a feudal system, established in remote unsettled and barbarous times.⁴⁸⁶

North and Robertson were of the opinion that thanks to the new system, the peasants would soon learn to enjoy the fruits of their labour, in contrast to working only for the benefit of others. As a result they would become much more industrious in the field and be inclined to work for wages for the government if required. In line with this plan, North also proposed to abolish the *accomodessan* system, and instead to pay the *mudaliyārs* and *lascorins* regular wages. If they wished, they could keep the

fields that were given them as *accomodessans*, but these were then taxed in line with other properties. Within two years of the failure of Andrew's government and Hobart's and Dundas' explicit instructions to restore the old order, North was tending once again in a more revolutionary direction.

This change of spirit was accelerated by his tour of the island between June and November 1800. North visited all major stations on the coast with the purpose of personally supervising his departments and in order to remove the backlog of criminal cases.⁴⁸⁷ Prior to his tour, North had imposed a new tax on jewelry, the joytax, against which the inhabitants of the region north of Colombo from Negombo to Mannar soon revolted. This rebellion was quickly suppressed, and North remained convinced of the worth of this tax. He also prided himself and his military officers for dealing with the ringleaders justly. He compared his rule with that of his Dutch predecessors, which he considered too severe, and that of De Meuron, whom he regarded as too mild. He was certainly not set back by the rebellion, but rather gained strength from it. He optimistically wrote to Wellesley that from a new government it could hardly be expected that everything would go well at once, but his grip was strengthening and things were getting better and better.⁴⁸⁸

While staying in Galle in July, he corresponded a lot with the Kandyan ministers whose propositions induced him to embark on a new diplomatic course.⁴⁸⁹ Moreover, during the tour he realized that the department of revenue and the judiciary could be further improved. He placed a lot of emphasis on the importance of the quality of his personnel and he expanded on his idea of appointing more Dutch servants to the lower posts, although he reserved the higher offices like those of judges and collectors for Company servants. In all, North moved further away from the original instructions of his superiors. The letters North wrote to Wellesley during the tour show a very positive and confident spirit, in contrast to his letters of the year before. In October 1800 he wrote from Trincomalee:

The only thing I want is a greater latitude in the choice of my instruments than I now have, and a greater power of rewarding and encouraging those with whose merit I am acquainted and whose services are tried. With that power I will engage to leave the colony in three years time / unless unforeseen accidents prevent it / in such a state as to add considerably not only to the security but to the affluence of the Indian possessions.⁴⁹⁰

Thus, North imposed on himself the ambitious task of solving all the island's financial and political problems by the end of his term. He must have thought that as long as this goal was attained some deviation from the official line of policy was acceptable. If successful, he would certainly benefit from it since the good impression he would leave behind increased his career opportunities.

The new spirit was aroused by the hands-on control North established over his inferiors through his severe approach of the Madras civilians and his inspection tour over the island. Another factor that played a role in the formulation of North's new plans was that he expected the island soon to fall entirely under the East India Company, in which case he would serve directly under his friend, the governor-general. Wellesley's military attitude towards Ceylon and his lack of interest in financial and administrative matters made North confident that he would have more freedom to operate on the island and that this would increase his authority over his servants. The plan to turn Trincomalee into a military rendezvous increased the importance of the island for the British empire, and added to the prestige of North's governorship. Also in the case of Kandy, he knew that if the opportunity arose, Wellesley would not be adverse to a scheme that would lead to occupation, even if this implied a declaration of war.⁴⁹¹

Thus, without the approval of the home authorities, but probably with the consent of Wellesley, North started to transform the government once again, and moved away further and further from the original idea that the government should resemble that of the Dutch as much as possible.

In the end both parties were presented more or less with a fait accompli: North could do nothing to obstruct Dundas' decision to place Ceylon directly under the Crown or to prevent the arrival of the twenty-four new appointees. At the same time, Dundas disagreed with North's reforms of the judicial and revenue departments and service tenures and even the diplomacy with Kandy, but he could do little about them. The uncertain solution for the dual government and the long-distance communication caused a new dynamism in colonial policy which was now moving in two directions.

North was of the opinion that proper rules and justice would stimulate the inhabitants to work harder which in turn would lead to improvements in the island's economy. Dundas assumed that good supervision and organization of the departments would be most fruitful. This contrast was not unique, and should be understood in the context of the colonial policy-making for India, as shall be discussed in Chapter Ten. For now the focus is on how North dealt with the contrast between his ideas and those of Dundas, his superior, and what policies he pursued in his last years as governor.

8.7 *A failed mission*

In the course of 1801, Governor-General Wellesley had to abandon the plan of turning Trincomalee into a military rendezvous. The visit of his

brother Colonel Wellesley turned out to be a failure. He left a memorandum stating the unsuitability of Trincomalee as a rendezvous for the Indian army. "I conclude that Trincomalee is useful as port only", wrote the Colonel,

that it is a bad place of rendezvous for an armament, because refreshments cannot be procured at it; because it has no buildings or conveniences for the troops in the bad weather during the winter months; because the communication with it is long and difficult at all times, entirely interrupted; and because it is probable that the passage from thence to any other part of India will be long and difficult.⁴⁹²

This was not the only change that North had to deal with. North's response to the news that Ceylon was to be a Crown colony was not very enthusiastic. As he wrote to Wellesley:

Unfortunately Dundas, as I see by the papers, has been busily employed in filling up the vacant offices in his gift, particularly those on Ceylon, so that, after having introduced regularity, economy, energy and parity, into all the departments of government, all the men who have served for these two years are to be displaced [...].⁴⁹³

He worried about the new servants that Dundas was sending out. Now that he had his departments under control and everybody was working so hard and had finally got the right spirit, he did not want new people. Moreover, he worried that these newcomers would not be as qualified as Dundas presented them to be and that extra functions would have to be created to sustain all of them. North's prejudices even allowed him to write that

All that I have heard of most of the individuals, is that they are in too high a situation at home to come out merely for a change of air; and I scarcely think that they would like to go through the drudgery which is cheerfully submitted to at present by the principal officers under me. The consequence will be an immoderate increase of the civil establishment.⁴⁹⁴

After they arrived, North was more measured in his judgement and in a way he seems to have felt empowered by the new situation: serving directly under the Crown gave him extra authority. In his letters to Wellesley he does not comment on the new instructions he received from Dundas, but from his despatches to London we learn that for the most part he continued with his own plans, though he adapted to those of Dundas in some respects. The reformation of the revenue and judicial departments went through. At first he replaced the four collectorates with thirteen revenue agents who were supervised by a board of revenue over which he presided. Obviously, this was done to increase control over the revenue and inland administration. Later he reduced the agents to six and named them collectors again, although they were all given an assistant. According to North, such departmental hierarchies were necessary to foster the possi-

bility of career development on the island, which would stimulate the servants to do their best.⁴⁹⁵

In the judicial department North focused on the inland part of its organization. By December 1799, the new courts were all operating successfully and North's measures were confirmed in the new charter of justice of 1801. Some changes regarding the organization of the supreme court were introduced and its authority was extended over civil cases as well. Yet after his tour over the island and before the new charter arrived North continued to reform the judiciary. He felt particularly uncomfortable with the eleven *landraden* and the three civil courts and decided to replace them with five provincial courts to be presided over by civil servants and assisted mainly by Dutch burghers. However, North intended to have the courts eventually headed by professional judges. More important was that the native headmen lost their official judicial powers in the districts. The reforms were successful in the sense that juridical establishment worked quite well until the end of North's rule, but the establishment had become very expensive and the implementation of the verdicts did not run smoothly. Moreover, it is difficult to really assess these changes because, due to the war with Kandy, martial law was implemented in the maritime districts starting 1803.⁴⁹⁶

In all, the period between 1800 and 1802 was a vibrant one. Following his own plans and in part those of Dundas, North turned to the agricultural development of the island. According to his despatches, his abolition of service tenures was slowly showing off its fruits. As the historian C.R. de Silva later wrote:

There were over five thousand lascarins in the Colombo districts alone (holding accomodessans), which meant a waste of labour in an ill-peopled and inadequately cultivated land. A considerable increase in the land revenue might therefore be expected.⁴⁹⁷

North not only expected a natural increase in land revenue from the abolition of the service tenures and *accomodessans*, he also thought that the inhabitants who had formerly worked without payment would become much more productive if they received salary for their labour, and could keep the produce of their land. North had commenced with the reforms only after consultation with his *mahāmudaliyār* who approved of it. Unlike in the days of Andrews, the radical switch did not cause any rebellion.⁴⁹⁸

Therefore North was in a position to reply very confidently to the doubts that the new Secretary of War, Lord Hobart, expressed in his first letter of 1802 concerning the abolition of the service tenures. North wrote that he had implemented these measures only after three years of experience and due consideration, that things were going well and that certainly he himself was in the best position to judge this. In his next

letter, Hobart took back his doubts and praised North for his actions. The abolition of the service tenures was combined with the commencement of large-scale land registration, in the manner of the Dutch *tombos*. North enthusiastically reported about the progress on this as well. Following Dundas' instructions, North had commenced with the development of the irrigation works. In each general letter North gave a report of their progress. This was not the only concession to Dundas' instructions. In the case of the Dutch servants, he did not stimulate them to engage in agriculture and gave up the idea of forming them into a class of administrative middlemen between indigenous society and the British. In practice, however, many Dutchmen kept their posts as clerks in the lower order of the administration and in the judicial department.⁴⁹⁹

North's general letters were very passionate about the developments in the inland government. He only expressed some disappointment about the fact that the people of the southwestern districts did not wish to be wage labourers for the government. He expected however that this would change over time after they had seen some good examples to follow. North also made more plans to improve the agriculture and general production of the island by inviting Chinese settlers and South Indian weavers to the island.⁵⁰⁰ These years (1800-1803) were really the heyday of his rule; his despatches are very positive and the reader can really believe that he had succeeded in his aim of making the island rich and orderly. The distance between London and Colombo and the consequent limited control from London gave him extra space to follow his own course.

This optimistic spirit, combined by the military successes of Wellesley in India, led North into a disastrous war with Kandy (1802-1805). We will see in the Chapter Eleven how after some initial successes which even led to the occupation of the capital, the British army was ambushed and one of its detachments massacred. The troops retreated to the maritime provinces but casualties continued along the border. The two parties remained at war until the end of North's governorship in 1805, although no major campaigns were undertaken anymore after 1803. From the moment that the Kandyan war started, North's despatches say less and less about the agricultural situation. Statements of the revenues are made, but he does not write about developments in the southwest or the results of the new modes of land possession. The war took up most of North's time, and in consequence at the same time he was losing control over the civilian officers. It is difficult to assess the extent to which this failure was the result of the inexperience of the new corps sent out by Dundas. In any case, the preoccupations with the war clearly wreaked havoc on North's plans for the southwest.⁵⁰¹

The last years of North's rule, which had begun with such promise,

ended in disaster. The Kandyan campaign ran out of control thanks in large part to problems with the military staff from 1804 onwards. The newly appointed General David Douglas Wemyss, who arrived in 1803, was responsible for extraordinary military expenses. Moreover, he and North got into a severe argument over judicial matters. The implementation of martial law over the whole of the southwest is a clear indication of the state of emergency faced by the colonial government. Moreover, the plantations were still not producing enough cinnamon and no extra cinnamon could be fetched from the Kandyan territories. To make things worse, a cattle plague in 1802 and two hurricanes in 1804 caused serious crop failures which resulted in famines in various regions of British Ceylon.⁵⁰²

This confluence of difficulties showed starkly that North's policy was spread too thin over too many issues. The effects of his inland policies were limited and from the remarks of his successor Thomas Maitland, who came early 1805, it is clear that by the end of his tenure North had lost his grip on the administration of the island and that the collectors and native chiefs were acting at their own discretion. North's energetic attitude between 1800 and 1802, the arrival of new civil servants and the war with Kandy had prolonged the transitional period and resulted in a call for a reactionary regime in London. North had in the meantime had requested his dismissal in 1803 and again in 1804, because of "bodily infirmity".⁵⁰³

8.8 *Conclusion*

During Frederick North's governorship, the destiny of the island within the British empire changed in two ways. First, the island was set apart from the East India Company administration and placed directly under the Crown. Second, the function of the island within the empire changed. It was occupied at first to help guarantee the security of Britain's Indian possessions, and the harbour of Trincomalee was considered a major strategic stronghold. Even as Governor-General Wellesley made plans to turn the harbour into a military rendezvous, Secretary of War Dundas changed his opinion and ordered the government of Ceylon to turn to the development of agriculture as its major source of income. The island was no longer to function as a bulwark of empire, but rather as a granary not only to be self-sufficient but in the future to provide the rest of the Indian empire with rice. This is very much in line with Van de Graaff's ambition for the island, with the major difference that Dundas wanted the whole island to produce paddy to the exclusion of other commercial crops suitable for long-distance trade.

The changes of policies directed “from above”, in Madras, Calcutta, and London, and the practical changes of authority and personnel, produced effects similar to those that resulted from the transition from the Dutch government to that of the EIC. North turned against the former civilians from Madras and tried to reorganize the various departments to assert his control. He depended on the native establishment and tried to ally with the former Dutch servants, whom he trusted more than the civilian bureaucrats installed by his predecessors. He initially followed the course of De Meuron in copying the Dutch mode of governing, but soon changed his mind and set upon a new course.

The simultaneous changes in authority and policy and Wellesley’s successful campaigns in India may explain the new endeavors North made in the organization of the government and the inland policy after 1800. Perhaps he felt empowered by British superiority on the battlefields and the final decision that the island was to remain in British hands. North did not so much change the system of indirect rule; after all he stuck to the native establishment as De Meuron had suggested, but he modernized it by formalizing the relationship by paying the headmen in money rather than land. Moreover, he took away the administration of justice from the native headmen and transferred this task to British civil servants. His further tax and land reforms, intended to free the peasants from the bonded services and to encourage agriculture, caused chaos. Whereas the change of the island’s destiny and the imperial successes in India help us understand the sudden shifts in his government, they do not necessarily explain North’s choices. The ideas behind his reforms and what inspired his choices will be subject of Chapter Ten.

In any case it is clear that North’s mission eventually failed. He did not succeed in turning Ceylon into a prosperous colony, nor did he succeed in overturning the Kandyan Kingdom. In fact, the Kandyan war was viewed as an excuse for his failures; but as we shall see, his successor had a different opinion on the matter.