INTRODUCTION

The facing page shows a photograph of a ritual that took place on 1 December 2025 in Paramaribo, Suriname, with King Willem-Alexander. It was a ceremony which the King himself had made clear that he wanted. He had previously given a long-awaited speech during the annual remembrance of slavery on 1 July 2023 in which he not only repeated the apologies already made on behalf of the Dutch government by the prime minister Mark Rutte for Dutch involvement in slavery, but also added a more personal request for forgiveness for 'the abundantly clear lack of action [taken by the House of Orange-Nassau] opposing this crime against humanity'. Through this ritual on the Suriname River, Indigenous people and descendants of enslaved people granted the King the forgiveness that he had asked for. But this did not end the debate about the legacy of slavery – that much is clear.

In the past few years, Willem-Alexander has spoken out publicly on several occasions criticizing the role played by the House of Orange-Nassau in Dutch history. During the annual ceremony for the remembrance of the dead on 4 May 2020, he reflected on the Netherlands' failings when the Jews were being persecuted, in words that did not spare his great-grandmother Queen Wilhelmina. Later that year, he offered excuses in Indonesia for the excessive force used by the Dutch army in the country's War of Independence. Although he did not say so explicitly, it is known that Wilhelmina supported that hardline approach. In 2022, the King announced that he would no longer be using the Golden Coach (traditionally used to transport the monarch on Budget Day and other ceremonial occasions), with its offensive panel 'Tribute from the colonies'.

In explaining his decision about the Golden Coach, Willem-Alexander (who studied history at Leiden University) did not mince

his words: 'Our history contains much to be proud of. Yet it also offers lessons for us to acknowledge the errors made and avoid them in the future. We cannot rewrite the past, but we *can* jointly attempt to come clean about it. That includes our colonial past.' Such an endeavour does, however, require a thorough understanding of that past. The Royal House realizes this. At the end of 2022, the board of the House of Orange-Nassau Historic Collections Trust, chaired by

Queen Máxima, commissioned a study researching the provenance of the remaining colonial artefacts in the Royal Collections. Later that same year, the King took the initiative in setting up a broad scholarly investigation into the role of the House of Orange-Nassau in Dutch colonial history. That research programme began at the start of 2023 and led to the publication of five books. *The Dutch Monarchy and its Colonial History, 1600–2025* summarizes the findings.

COLONIAL HISTORY AND DECOLONIZATION

Colonialism and slavery had far-reaching consequences above all for lands a long way away from the Netherlands. However, in our research programme, we focused on the role played in that colonial history by the country's most prominent aristocratic family, the Orange-Nassaus, and its significance for them. This means that the history of the colonies themselves is covered in this book only insofar as it provides the context for that story. The focus only shifts somewhat in the sixth chapter.

Even so, some knowledge of Dutch colonial history is indispensable for a proper understanding of what follows. This book therefore starts with a brief – and inevitably simplified – overview of that colonial history. It should be noted that 'colonialism' and 'colonial history' are broad and rather imprecise concepts, and that also applies when discussing Dutch history. The first voyages of discovery to Asia were driven by a desire to trade rather than an urge to found overseas colonies. That remained the case in some places, but elsewhere colonies were established in due course. In the Americas, European states progressed to colonization almost immediately, ushering in a history of voluntary migration from Europe and, most notably, the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The term

'imperialism' is sometimes used for the period from the late nineteenth century: colonial powers were now able to maintain much firmer control of their colonies, thanks in part to industrialization and technological innovations, while imperialist cultures developed in the metropoles. Much more could be said about that distinction, but for the purposes of this book the term 'colonial history' is appropriate for the entire four centuries.

The start of Dutch colonialism can be dated to around 1600. It is harder to give a date for the end, if only because that past still has so many repercussions in the present. In 1600, the Netherlands – or more precisely the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands – was embroiled in a war with Spain to gain independence. During that period, the Netherlands – and above all the provinces of Holland and Zeeland – grew to become one of the most affluent places on the planet. Its agriculture, fisheries, and industries were key factors in its wealth, but so too was trade, initially within Europe and later on further afield. The Republic set up the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, VOC) in 1602, followed by the Dutch West India Company (*West-Indische Compagnie*, WIC) in 1621. Trade, overseas government, and even war were delegated wherever possible to these Companies. Military force on land and at sea was deployed against both European rivals and the states and peoples of the territories in which the Companies established trading posts and settlements.

The VOC was by far the more important of the two colonial enterprises, and also the more successful from a Dutch perspective. It occupied parts of what would later become Indonesia, building towns such as Jakarta, as it is now known, using the labour of enslaved people. The VOC also founded the Cape Colony in present-day South Africa and colonized parts of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Malacca (now part of Malaysia). Furthermore, it set up numerous trading posts that extended from the Middle East to China and Japan; in these places, it was more of a petitioner than the dominant party. Within its charter territory (its assigned field of operation), the Company traded in both goods and people with numerous partners. Hundreds of thousands – possibly over a million – enslaved people from Africa and Asia were purchased and traded in the Company's territory. It should be noted that they were bought and sold mainly

by other Europeans and Asians acting on their own account rather than the VOC itself, but the Company still benefited from their slave labour. The economic significance of the VOC fluctuated over the course of the nearly two centuries of its existence, but overall it was a success for the Dutch Republic and its shareholders. That ended when it went into liquidation in 1798, several years after the collapse of the Republic.

The WIC was not such a great success from the point of view of its stakeholders in the Republic. The first West India Company went bankrupt in 1674. The second operated from 1674 to 1793, but was just as much of a fiasco for its shareholders. Nevertheless, this company was the driving factor in a series of conquests and a trans-Atlantic slave trade in which some 600,000 Africans were transported. The human toll was much greater still as many people in Africa died, were displaced, or lost loved ones as a result of the slave trade, and as many did not survive the middle passage on the slave ships, while numerous generations on the other side of the ocean grew up, laboured, and died in slavery. The first colony of any importance founded by the WIC was New Brazil, but it soon passed into the hands of European rivals, as did New Netherland (in and around Manhattan, New York). Ultimately, the Netherlands established longstanding colonies on the six Caribbean islands that would later be known as the Netherlands Antilles, plus four plantation colonies on the north coast of South America, with Suriname being by far the most important. Two semi-public organizations were set up to manage the colonies: the Society of Suriname and the Society of Berbice.

The Republic of the Seven United Netherlands fell in 1795. The Netherlands initially became the Batavian Republic within the French sphere of influence and later part of Napoleon Bonaparte's French empire as the Kingdom of Holland (1806). The British, France's main enemy, captured nearly all the Dutch colonies, with the explicit consent of the Dutch stadtholder William V, who had fled to England. The Napoleonic Wars ended with the defeat of France in 1815. The victorious major powers granted the Netherlands a new lease of life, this time as the Kingdom of the Netherlands. However, Britain claimed parts of the Dutch colonial empire. Ceylon, Malacca, and the Cape Colony became British, as did the three plantation colonies

adjoining Suriname, Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo – becoming what is now Guyana. The Netherlands did regain colonial control of the huge Indonesian archipelago, along with Suriname and the six Caribbean islands. It also kept the trading post of Elmina (in Ghana), but that too fell into British hands in 1872. Furthermore, the British forced the Netherlands to comply with the British ban on the trade in enslaved people. A crucial difference with respect to the period before was that the Dutch state now started to pursue a colonial policy without the Companies acting as intermediaries.

From 1815 to 1942, the area then known as the Dutch East Indies was increasingly subjugated and colonized, and its economy appropriated. Dutch interests took precedence, although from 1900 what was termed the Ethical Policy aimed to take the interests of the local Indonesian population seriously. The Dutch East Indies were a crucial factor in the economic development of the Netherlands itself, and for its geopolitical status. This colony, huge in terms of both land area and population, with 70 million people in 1940, was enormously important for the Netherlands with its 9 million inhabitants. The Netherlands would have been a small and rather insignificant country without the East Indies. As a result, the colonial authorities were resolutely opposed to Indonesian nationalism, imprisoning the movement's leaders for years on end. They saw the country's independence at most as something that might happen in the distant future. The only dissenting voices in the Dutch Parliament were a few socialists and the Communist Party of Holland.

Meanwhile, Suriname and the Caribbean islands were increasingly becoming a cause for concern from a colonial perspective. Slavery had been abolished in these colonies in 1863. In Suriname, over 60,000 indentured labourers had subsequently been brought in to replace the African-Surinamese plantation workers – initially from China but later largely from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in British India and from Java. The colonies' economies remained weak. Attempts to develop the Caribbean islands bore little result. There were some in the Netherlands who advocated selling the two colonies now that they were merely costing money and causing headaches for the 'mother country' (in itself a colonial perspective). That never happened, as a sale would have been an affront to Dutch national honour, and there were no prospective buyers anyway. The 1920s

saw a resurgence in the local economies with the development of the bauxite industry in Suriname and with oil refineries being built on Aruba and Curaçao. This growth was sustained for several decades, but the populations remained small, with fewer than half a million people in total living in the two Caribbean colonies in 1940. Nevertheless, the colonies made a significant contribution to the Allied war effort during the Second World War through the bauxite and oil industries.

That war was the beginning of the end for Dutch colonial history. Germany occupied the Netherlands in May 1940 and Japan defeated the colonial regime in the Dutch East Indies at the start of 1942. On 17 August 1945, two days before the Japanese surrendered, Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta proclaimed independence in Indonesia. The Netherlands refused to accept this. More than four years passed before the Netherlands finally conceded – years of endless negotiations but above all a ferocious war that cost the lives of at least 100,000 people on the Indonesian side and with almost 10,000 military and civilian deaths on the Dutch side. A roundtable conference held in The Hague resulted in the official transfer of sovereignty on 27 December 1949 in the Royal Palace in Amsterdam. It was signed by Queen Juliana. The Netherlands managed to exclude New Guinea (now Papua) from the agreement, but this 'overseas territory' was handed over to Indonesia after all in 1962, via the United Nations.

In 1954, after lengthy negotiations, the two Caribbean colonies attained the status of autonomous countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Suriname became an independent republic in 1975. The Netherlands Antilles refused to take that step, but neither did they wish to continue as a single entity. Aruba acquired semi-autonomous status in 1986, and in 2010, the Netherlands Antilles were dismantled. Since then, the Kingdom of the Netherlands has consisted of four formally autonomous countries: Aruba, Curaçao, Sint Maarten, and the Netherlands. The three smallest Caribbean islands – Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba – have been incorporated in the Netherlands as 'public bodies' (essentially municipalities).

The implications of decolonization for Indonesia, Suriname, and the Caribbean islands are largely beyond the scope of this book. However, Chapter 6 does pay attention to one consequence that has had a major impact on the Netherlands as well, namely the successive

waves of postcolonial migration. Between 1945 and the early 1960s, the migrants were mainly from Indonesia; in the 1970s and early 1980s from Suriname; and since then from the Caribbean islands, Curaçao in particular. The migrants from Indonesia were ethnic minorities in the colony: *Indisch*-Dutch (with both Indonesian and Dutch forebears), *totoks* (white people 'returning'), Moluccans, and Indonesian Chinese. This first generation of migrants totalled about 350,000 people. There are now considered to be between one and two million Dutch people with *Indisch* 'roots', a figure that includes descendants in the fourth generation and beyond. Over a third of the population of Suriname left the country in the years surrounding its independence. Most of those emigrants were people with African, Indian, or Javanese roots. In the 1980s, during the military dictatorship there, thousands more Surinamese fled to the Netherlands, this time including Maroons and Indigenous people. The Surinamese community in the Netherlands is currently estimated at 400,000 people, compared with over 600,000 in Suriname itself. The Antillean community in the Netherlands is still growing, reflecting their right to settle in the country as they hold Dutch passports. The 'seventh island', as the Antillean community in the Netherlands is known, now has about 175,000 people compared with 330,000 on the six islands. Three quarters of Antilleans in the Netherlands have Curaçaoan roots.

These waves of migration were an unanticipated consequence of the centuries of colonial rule: 'We are here because you were there!' What was the perceived justification for that colonialism? Colonial rule seemed perfectly natural from the point of view of early modern Europeans – including the Dutch. They believed that the culture of white Christian Europeans was superior to all other cultures, anywhere in the world. This attitude and mindset served to justify colonialism, the trade in enslaved people, and slavery itself. The pursuit of profit, geopolitical interests, racism, and violence were inextricably linked. Spain and Portugal, the first colonial powers, still felt that it was important to disseminate the 'one true faith', Catholicism. Subsequent colonial powers, such as the Protestant Netherlands, were less interested in proselytizing. For centuries, the pastors provided the justification that the merchants needed and rarely stood in their way.

In short, colonialism was mainly about serving national interests, whether economic or geopolitical. At a later stage, idealistic objectives were added along the lines of the civilization offensive and missionary work – a form of development aid *avant la lettre*. The Netherlands was no exception. The Dutch Ethical Policy was still based on the assumption of the colonizers' superiority, no matter whether or not it was formulated in racist terms. Moreover, the Ethical Policy was never an obstacle to colonial oppression or wars. Wherever the Dutch had colonies, racism and the use of violence against anyone who opposed colonialism were constant features from the start right up to the end. And the violence in the colonies was considerably more heavy-handed and ruthless than the methods used to maintain the status quo in the mother country. Resistance against Dutch colonial rule was noted, but it was rejected and suppressed. There was no appreciation of what it meant, let alone any attempt to meet its demands.

Who decided the colonial policy in the Netherlands, who was involved, who knew about it, and who profited? Historians are not agreed on whether colonialism delivered the intended economic benefits in practice in the course of the centuries. It is important anyway to distinguish between the various territories colonized by the Netherlands, between the different periods, and between the Dutch state, private enterprises, civil society (religious institutions, schools, and universities), and private individuals. It is not easy to determine the extent to which the lower classes in the Netherlands enjoyed any genuine benefit from the colonies in terms of their work, prosperity, and consumption. Nor is there a consensus regarding whether the majority of Dutch people were aware of what was going on 'overseas'. It is clear, however, that few people had any real say in politics, including colonial policy, until well into the twentieth century. Even the army conscripts who had to fight in the last major colonial war in Indonesia (1945–1949) had not had any input in the decisions that preceded this conflict as they had been too young to vote. Substantive influence was limited to the elites in the Netherlands virtually right up to the end, with the House of Orange-Nassau playing a prominent role within these elites.

The first European colonial powers were Portugal, then Spain. They were soon followed by England, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden. In the late nineteenth century, three newly formed states were added to that list: Italy, Belgium, and Germany. All these colonial powers were ruled by a king or queen, the only exception being the Netherlands in the time of the Republic. One of the five books which we published in this research project is *European Monarchs & Colonialism,* which draws international comparisons. The questions that the authors of that book try to answer concern the involvement of European monarchs in colonialism. Their findings are discussed in the closing chapter of this book, the 'Summing Up'. For now, it is important to emphasize that both Dutch colonialism and the involvement of the Orange-Nassaus should be understood in the context of rivalry with the other European colonial powers. The Orange-Nassau family's involvement raised their status in their own country and indirectly enhanced their position in the international hierarchy of European princely families.

The country now known as the Netherlands has a long history that extends back in time long before the fight for independence in the Dutch Revolt, also known as the Eighty Years' War against Spain (1568–1648). But that war does mark the start of the Netherlands as an independent state – a republic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then a kingdom from the nineteenth century onwards. The House of Orange-Nassau often played a key role in this history. During the struggle for independence and in the time of the Republic, a series of stadtholders from the family held prominent military and political positions. In the time of the kingdom, the Orange-Nassau kings and queens were the heads of state and influenced the country's government, although their power was gradually curtailed.

The Netherlands was *de facto* an independent state by 1600, even if international recognition only came later. The young Republic was ambitious on all fronts, including in its desire to establish its own colonial empire. As a result, the national history of the Dutch state became intertwined with the creation of a colonial empire from the early seventeenth century. That would remain the case both during the Republic and long afterwards. This is neatly illustrated by the

Queen Wilhelmina and Prince Hendrik arriving at the Parliament building in The Hague in the Golden Coach for the opening of the joint session of the States General. NV Vereenigde Fotobureaux, 1931.

fact that even today the Kingdom of the Netherlands borders not just the North Sea but also the Caribbean, while some two million Dutch people have family histories with roots in the former colonies.

For over four centuries, the House of Orange-Nassau played a prominent, if rarely decisive, role in Dutch history. Throughout those four centuries, Dutch history was also colonial history – with two and a half centuries of slavery. That raises questions about the

involvement of the Orange-Nassaus in this colonial past. But remarkably little has been written on the subject. Almost no attention has been paid to their role in the historiography of Dutch colonialism, while the historiography of the House of Orange-Nassau has not dwelt on their significance for colonial history. The only book that considered their involvement in a broad sense – *De parels en de kroon. Het koningshuis en de koloniën* ('The pearls and the crown. The royal house and the colonies') – was published twenty years ago and was merely intended as an initial exploration paving the way for a deeper examination of the topic. Various studies have been published since then that shed light on specific aspects of this intersection of the family and colonialism, but there has been no comprehensive publication.

An initial and unsurprising conclusion that could be drawn based on the historiography to date is that all the stadtholders and all the monarchs who followed them probably supported colonialism and considered it important for the economic development and international prestige of the Netherlands itself. Only the postwar queens Juliana and Beatrix seemed to hold views that were less colonial and therefore less self-seeking and nationalist – but that was in a time when colonialism was coming to an end and the House of Orange-Nassau only played a modest role in politics. However, these conclusions were largely based on anecdotal evidence, which was far from satisfactory. With the exception of King William I and Queen Wilhelmina, little of note was known about the colonial views of members of the royal House, and there was little evidence of far-reaching involvement and interference with colonial policy.

Even less was known about any financial benefit that the Orange-Nassaus might have had from colonialism. It seems plausible that their involvement in colonial policy was motivated at least in part by economic considerations – the hope of income not just for the Netherlands but also for them personally. There was clear evidence of the stadtholders taking part in the VOC and WIC, which generated revenue for them. The later kings and queens also had direct stakes in the colonies, and indirect stakes in the sense that their income depended partly on an allowance paid by the state from a national budget that included revenue from the colonies. But it was not possible to deter-

mine the extent to which the House of Orange-Nassau profited financially from Dutch colonialism based on the existing historiography.

Benefits can be measured in aspects other than the strictly financial, namely in the form of status and prestige, which are both key to dynastic interests. There can be no doubt that the stadtholders, kings, and queens benefited from Dutch colonialism in that sense. In their contacts overseas, the VOC often presented the stadtholders as proper monarchs, which presumably enhanced their prestige back home as well. Maps and pictures of distant settlements in their palaces illustrated the colonial dimension of the empire in which they had a role. Colonial objects of artistic and ethnographic interest found their way into the Orange-Nassau family's personal collections, often in the form of gifts – although doubts can be raised about just how voluntary those donations were. Servants and visitors from the colonies had a similar function at the court. Various studies have been published in recent years on these specific topics, but there was no overview that was in any way comprehensive.

Certainly in the final century of colonialism, the House of Orange-Nassau was deliberately deployed in representations of imperial unity in an attempt to nurture a feeling in the colonies that it was good, and even a privilege, to be part of the Dutch colonial empire. There are plenty of examples: offering gifts on behalf of the Orange-Nassaus; celebrating Orange-Nassau festivals in the colonies; the creation of the myth that King William III was personally responsible for the abolition of Caribbean slavery; or presenting the imperial Queen Wilhelmina as the personification of the new Ethical Policy and guardian of the well-being of her distant colonial subjects. The rise of the mass media from the late nineteenth century onwards played a key role here, while the growth of aviation in the post-war period enabled regular royal visits to the 'overseas territories'. But did this actually 'work': did colonial subjects really feel a bond with the Netherlands through the House of Orange-Nassau? Several studies published in the past point to results that were mixed at best. But here too, there was much that remained to be investigated.

One could say that the Netherlands has rediscovered its colonial past in recent decades in a societal context that has become steadily more critical. The tone has been set by activists among various postcolonial migrant communities – logically, as they had never forgotten that history. The argument 'We are here because you were there' became a powerful rhetorical weapon drawing attention to this past. In 2002, the National Slavery Monument was erected in Amsterdam, and in 2006, the Dutch government issued a statement that the Netherlands had waged a 'war on the wrong side of history' in Indonesia between 1945 and 1949. This critical reappraisal of the past gathered momentum from 2020 with excuses made by the King and the Prime Minister. In 2022, Prime Minister Mark Rutte repeated King Willem-Alexander's apologies for the extreme violence in the Indonesian War of Independence, after the results were published of a research project funded by his government. When making his excuses for the slavery in the past, the Prime Minister stressed that this was only a beginning, 'a comma, not a full stop'. A series of Dutch provinces and cities have since offered their own apologies for their share in the history of slavery, or colonialism more broadly. These excuses were preceded by historical research initiated and funded by the government, provincial authorities, or city municipalities in question. Other public institutions have followed suit with research projects and often official apologies of their own; they include universities, the Dutch central bank, and churches. They were followed by prominent companies.

Willem-Alexander's decision to commission research into the colonial history of his own family should be understood in this context. It was clear from the start for both the King and the researchers that such a project would only be meaningful if it could be carried out with complete independence, as is *de rigueur* in academic scholarship. The section entitled 'Approach' at the end of this book explains how the research was organized and conducted. It was indeed carried out in conditions of complete independence, with only a very broad initial request to investigate 'the role of the House of Orange-Nassau in the colonial history of the Netherlands'.

About sixty authors worked on the project, which has resulted in five books. Four are edited collections in which this history is considered from various angles. *From William the Silent to Willem-Alexander*, edited by Gert Oostindie, Tristan Mostert, Erik Odegard, and Bart Verheijen, has a biographical setup. The book investigates the involvement of successive stadtholders, kings, and queens in colonialism and slavery. *Colonial Power, Profit, and Status*, edited by Gert Oostindie and Henk te Velde, examines their involvement in the three areas mentioned in the title, and considers the consequences. The volume edited by Esther Captain and Guno Jones, *In the Shadow of the Orange Sun*, shifts the focus from the metropole to the former colonies and the postcolonial communities in the Netherlands. In particular, it pays attention to dissenting voices. *European Monarchs & Colonialism*, edited by Gert Oostindie and Karwan Fatah-Black, compares how the monarchs in ten European countries that possessed colonies were involved in colonialism; this puts the Dutch situation in a broader context. As said, *The Dutch Monarchy and its Colonial History, 1600–2025* is the fifth book in the series. It provides a summary of the findings.

Any study of 'the role of the House of Orange-Nassau in Dutch colonial history' will inevitably be a challenge as there is always interest in anything to do with the royal family, and colonialism is a contentious subject. It was by no means easy to form a sharp picture of the involvement of the House of Orange-Nassau based on examinations of a large number of sources that had not been studied from this particular perspective before. Then there was the challenge of the fact that the research did not take place in a vacuum. The context in which King Willem-Alexander took this initiative was, and is, emotionally charged. It was agreed beforehand that the findings would be made public, whatever they were. In taking this step, the King was essentially endorsing the principle of 'a comma, not a full stop'. Transparency and acknowledgement are after all part of the process termed 'reparations', righting historical wrongs.

As researchers, we are aware that the results of our work will reverberate in society and play a role in the postcolonial debate in the Netherlands, the former colonies, and perhaps in other places too (such as other European countries where monarchies were involved in colonialism). How did that affect our approach to the

Indigenous inhabitants from places including Bernharddorp ('Bernhard Village') waiting to welcome Queen Juliana and Prince Bernhard at Zanderij Airfield in Suriname. Photograph by Willem van de Poll, 1955.

research project? Our main focus was on performing thorough, sound historical analyses and sharing the results. However, the members of the research team also reflected on and discussed the social context in which we were working.

The public debate has been fierce at times. There has undoubtedly been a growing willingness to publically acknowledge that slavery and many other aspects of colonialism – or indeed colonialism as such – violated fundamental human rights. Hence the apologies. But while this does not go far enough for some, or is seen merely as a first step, others reject these gestures in an opposing reaction that

has unmistakeably gained momentum in recent years. Polarization has emerged, not only in the views on the history of colonialism itself but also in the opinions on how we could or should discuss that past today.

This book cannot ignore that context, nor can it avoid the question of how our findings fit in with the postcolonial debate and the King's previous statements about slavery and colonialism. These issues are discussed in the final chapter, the 'Summing Up'. It does not merely consider the actions of the Orange-Nassau family in the context of the age they lived in but also asks whether they could have had different attitudes or behaved differently. The importance of that question lies in the awareness that the House of Orange-Nassau – the most prominent noble family in the Republic of the United Netherlands and the supplier of the heads of state for the Kingdom of the Netherlands – could have changed the course of the history of Dutch colonialism and slavery.

This book is aimed at a broad readership. It summarizes the content of the four other books that resulted from this research project. Condensing the over 1,800 pages of those other books into merely 250 pages here was an enormous challenge. The author of this book benefited from the work of the whole research team. For each chapter, a specification is given of the contributions on which it is based. That is not just to give credit where credit is due, but also in the hope that many readers of this book will want to continue with the other volumes, in which this history is explored in much greater detail, with many fascinating illustrations and meticulous references to the sources. The decision was made to keep the source references in this book concise. In fact, they are mainly to publications by our own research team, which form the latest findings in the historiography.

The first three chapters consider the involvement of the successive members of the House of Orange-Nassau in colonialism. The chapters discuss their interest in colonial policy, expertise in this field, and attitudes, look at how much scope they were given, and took, for making interventions, and analyse what this meant to them. The approach is chronological. First the stadtholders are discussed, followed by the first three kings and the first queens Emma and Wilhelmina, and finally Juliana, Beatrix, and Willem-Alexander.

The fourth chapter summarizes the findings regarding the financial involvement of the House of Orange-Nassau in colonialism, and slavery in particular. The fifth chapter looks at how colonialism was literally made visible at the court of the stadtholders and later the monarchs, in the palaces and gardens, in the collections, and in courtly culture. Colonialism and violence are inextricably linked, but the subject peoples were told that colonialism was a positive and self-evident development. This is the topic of the sixth chapter, which focuses more than the others on the broad repercussions and legacy, both in the past and today, of colonialism.

The final chapter, the 'Summing Up', summarizes the key findings and places them in a wider national and international context. This is followed by a reflection on the significance today of this research. Caution is called for here. The aim of this research was to clarify the involvement of the House of Orange-Nassau in colonial history. That is essentially what this book does; it does not seek to make a moral judgement that would by definition also be a product of its time. However, the concluding chapter does consider how the findings of the research project relate to the apologies made previously by King Willem-Alexander and to his wish to come clean about the colonial connections of his ancestors.

Stadtholder William IV with his Black servant Jean Rabo. Jacques-André-Joseph Camellot Aved, 1751.