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'Zonder eigen gewinne en glorie' : Mr. Iman Wilhelm Falck (1736-1785), gouverneur en directeur van Ceylon en Onderhorigheden

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Summary*

'It is a pity that so far no biography of this remarkable Governor of Ceylon has been written.' Jan van Lohuizen was referring to Iman Willem Falck (1736-1785) when he wrote this in 1961 in his thesis titled *The Dutch East India Company and Mysore, 1762-1790*. This study fills that gap. It is not a typical biography; it goes further and includes elements of a prosopographical study, as Falck belonged to the governing class of the Dutch Republic and to the elite of qualified servants in Asia. The result is somewhere between a biography and an extensive analysis of Falck's political-administrative period in Asia, in particular of his extremely long period of office as Governor of Ceylon and its Dependencies, 1765-1785.

He was born in Colombo, the son of Frans Willem Falck, who had recently been supreme head of the southern city of Matara and Deputy Dessave of Galle. The Falck family originally came from East Friesland and belonged to an ancient line of country gentlemen who had played an active role in regional politics. His grandfather had settled in Utrecht with his family after a military career in a Danish so-called subsidy regiment in the States Army. Through his wife, a member of an eminent Cologne family, this grandfather had made connections with several Utrecht regents. A financial mistake while director of the *Utrechtse Geocroyeerde Compagnie* (Utrecht Chartered Company) resulted in most of his children being forced to seek their fortune with the *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC, United East India Company), States Army or the Fleet. After the sons had accumulated an adequate fortune and the daughters had married favourably, they could take their place among the regents of Utrecht.

At a young age Iman came from Ceylon to live with his grandmother Constantia Margaretha Meinertzhagen, the widow Falck. Like other regents' sons he attended the Latin School and the Utrecht Academy, where he was awarded a PhD in both branches of law studies, Roman Dutch law and Canon law. Given his background, relations, wealth and intelligence, a position in the legal profession in Utrecht seemed an obvious step towards becoming a member of the *vroedschap*, as the city council was called. Instead he signed up with his cousin Otto Willem at the VOC and was appointed assistant merchant. After arriving in Batavia he was quickly promoted, partly thanks to his patron Thomas Hope in Amsterdam, Prince William V's representative on the board of the VOC, known as the *Heren XVII* (Gentlemen Seventeen), and his other favourable contacts. He could count on the protection of the Governors-General Mossel and Van der Parra in the VOC's administrative centre of power.

* Vertaling Jean Vaughan, Engels TaalService Amsterdam.

In 1765, at the age of 28, the majority of those present at the meeting of the High Government voted for his appointment as Governor of Ceylon and its Dependencies. Within a year he had brought the long drawn-out war with the King of Kandy to an end and in 1766 concluded a favourable peace treaty. From then the Company not only had complete sovereignty over the areas they already administered in the king's name, but also acquired the entire coastal area of the island.

During the twenty years of Falck's administration, owing to his demeanour the island was largely peaceful until the outbreak of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War in 1781. After the peace with Kandy, Colombo in fact had actual power over an important part of the island and Falck held that it was possible to maintain this power with very few armed forces. During his administration he gave an important impetus to the construction of cinnamon gardens, where the expensive spice was cultivated for the first time instead of growing wild. He acted as an enlightened administrator, behaving pragmatically and showing a large measure of justice and humanity. His administrative vision was not only directed at Ceylon but also in particular at developments in South India. Officially he only had authority over the Dependencies, the coastal area in the south of the principality of Madurai, opposite Ceylon, with a number of branches and bases in the area surrounding the fortress of Tuticorin. In practice he was actually involved in the whole of South India, where the VOC had fortifications and bases in various places. He gave advice and made troops available to the most important Dutch Governors, commanders and chiefs, with the exception of the distant Bengal.

The Indian subcontinent had descended into chaos after the disintegration of the Kingdom of the Great Mughals and the victory in 1757 of the commander of the British East India Company, Robert Clive, at Plassey over the Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula of Bengal. This was followed by a longstanding power struggle between the British, the French, the rulers of Mysore, Arcot (the Carnatic), the nizam of Hyderabad and the leaders of the Marat Confederation to fill the power vacuum. Minor rulers also tried to play their own role, such as the Rajas of Cochin, Madurai and Tanjore, some of whom hoped to strengthen their position through treaties with the VOC. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, the role of the Company as a great power was already really over.

Falck's political strategy was directed at keeping the British and French trading companies at a safe distance from Ceylon. These companies were supported by squadrons from their national navies in the second half of the eighteenth century, targeting in particular the most strategic harbour in the South Indian region, Trincomalee. The relations between the King of Kandy and his family in Madurai were watched closely in the context of this security strategy. Although Falck could easily keep the King of Kandy under his thumb, he knew that little could be accomplished against a British or French enemy from outside. He saw India as Ceylon's Achilles heel. Therefore a balance had to be maintained between the various parties in South India and the struggle between those parties had to be confined there. This policy could only succeed by making treaties and concluding alliances with the powerful native rulers: Haider Ali of Mysore, the ally of the French, and Muhammad Ali of Arcot, the ally of the British.

Falck's ideas were at odds with the strictly neutral policy of the Republic which the High Government observed precisely in Batavia. Although Falck's policy was not endorsed at first,

it did gradually acquire more support. Before the outbreak of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War in 1781, owing to circumstances, however, his actions did not result in actual treaties and alliances. It was thanks to the support of Haider Ali that the British were unable to take all of the VOC's possessions in South India during this war and Cochin remained in the hands of the Company. Owing to the support of the French fleet, within a year Trincomalee was retaken from the British and the security of the rest of Ceylon could be assured. The Company's weakened position made it dependent on the support of its former opponent Kandy, who had even refused the British advances to form an alliance. Consequently, after the end of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, the VOC had as a matter of course to concede to the Court of Kandy.

If it had been up to Falck, treaties would have been made with Haider Ali at the end of the 1760s. The latter did not yet threaten the friendly rulers of Cochin and Travancore. In 1772 and 1780-1781 advanced written negotiations took place about a military treaty with Muhammad Ali of Arcot and the British administration in Madras. This had no further consequences owing to the deep unrest within the British administration in 1772, due in Falck's eyes to the lax decision making within the High Government in Batavia. Ultimately the outbreak of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War put an end to further negotiations.

The Hague and Batavia were kept informed of all Falck's diplomatic initiatives, supported by the Council of Ceylon. He was never called to account for this, even though such initiatives were against the Republic's strictly neutral policy. His relationship with Prince William V, the Governors, Thomas Hope, the Governors-General (especially Van der Parra) and virtually all the members of the High Government was excellent. In the Republic the governors were always extremely satisfied with his style of administration and his political-strategic policy on Ceylon and in South India and he was therefore highly admired and respected. The Court at Kandy shared this favourable judgement, in particular because of his fair and respectful approach towards his envoys and towards their compatriots in the Company's territories.

In 1783 Falck was notified that in 1781 the Prince had appointed him director-general in Batavia instead of the supreme ordinary Hendrik Breton chosen by the High Government. There was even talk in The Hague of making him Governor-General. He declined the honour, however, because he was extremely disappointed in the position taken by the Republic during the war, in particular the late sending of a State squadron. Moreover, he was mentally and physically exhausted and thought that someone younger in spirit should be found for the job. His poor health and depression made him doubt his own ability as Governor of Ceylon. Ultimately he had had enough of the Company and wanted to return home but he remained in his post until his death, possibly showing himself to be too accommodating in those last two years. This did not affect, however, his robust approach regarding the return of Trincomalee, which the British had taken in 1781 and the French then relieved. He dedicated himself completely to the rapid and complete transfer from the French. This was not to proceed through the British, who regarding this called upon an article in the provisional peace treaty that had been agreed between the French and the British in Paris.

Falck was able to take a few confidants with him to Colombo and, sooner or later, could make them members of the Council of Ceylon. As a result he certainly acquired some pow-

er. However, this was mainly due to the fact that he won the confidence of the entire Council, owing to his amicable administration, openness and huge zest for work. Thanks to his lifelong friendship with a number of important members of the Council, such as Moens, Van de Graaff and Johan van Angelbeek, Falck was able to continue to implement his policy, although he was sometimes ‘unavailable’ for longer periods during his administration. We know what the starting points for his administrative policy were from a memorandum titled the *Aanmerkingen op de Reflexien* (Comments on the Reflections). The text itself, the Reflections, has not survived. His moral starting points are very clear in another memorandum, *Inkomsten van de gouverneur* (Incomes of the governor). Furthermore, we can follow the day-to-day administrative course of events via the resolutions of the Council of Ceylon, the daybooks, the reports of envoys to the Court of Kandy, and the many hundreds of incoming and outgoing letters written on behalf of the Governor. All these sources provide insight into what was happening on the island itself and also across the water, in South India.

The active role of the Company was one of the pillars of the political-strategic policy of Falck and his confidants in the Council. Some years after Falck took office, Adriaan Moens and Willem van de Graaff were to start playing an administrative and executive role from Surat and Cochin respectively. The latter and the Company’s territories elsewhere in the Malabar were of great importance for the security of Ceylon.

The VOC historian F.W. Stapel described Falck in 1939 as the last great figure in the Company and the nineteenth-century historian N.G. van Kampen commented in 1833 that Falck could have saved the Company. Both statements are impossible to prove. After studying Falck’s period of administration, however, it is evident that his outstanding political and strategic insight differentiated him from his contemporaries and many predecessors as an administrator. Without explicitly trying to explain this, Stapel and Van Kampen realized, perhaps consciously or unconsciously, that Falck’s insight into the situation of Ceylon may have made him more capable of helping the ailing Company than his contemporaries, whom he distinguished himself from by his geo-political thinking. It is remarkable that he dared – and was also evidently in a position to do so – to make his own independent judgement.

On Falck’s death unfulfilled high expectations of him remained. During the meeting of the States General in The Hague on 19 May 1786 the first lawyer of the Company F.W. Boers said in the presence of the powerful gentlemen assembled there:

This man, only just 41 years [actually more than 48 years] old, died thus at the prime of his life, whilst the strength of his spirit, and the excellence of his sagacity, still had so much good to offer the Company.

His contribution ‘without self gain and glory’ is possibly a reason that so little was known about his actual life story, although in the annals he generally comes over as an esteemed and respected person. Almost symbolically, none of his coats of arms appear on his commemorative plaque. With this study about his life, policy and acquaintances, Falck’s reputation is no longer unknown.

The research for this thesis pays extensive attention to Falck’s networks and to unravelling these networks. By looking at other networks further, particularly at the many partici-

pants and their mutual relations, the one as client, the other as patron, new insight could be gained into the relations between the qualified servants of the Company in Asia and of the State in patria. Falck's history is studied against the background of existing literature, official correspondence and contemporary opinions, compared to and complemented with all the semi-official and private correspondence still available, which further research proved to be surprisingly copious. Official correspondence in the VOC archives and in the collection of the Stadholders' office in the Dutch National Archives in The Hague, the VOC archives from 'The Dutch Period' in the National Archives of Sri Lanka in Colombo and the archives of the Madras Select Committee in The British Library in London were also used.

The semi-official documents include extensive correspondence between Falck and Prince William V in the archives of the Dutch Royal Family. The personal correspondence comprises the letters received and sent by Falck in the Hope Collection and in the Fagel Collection in the Dutch National Archives; the correspondence between the cousins Iman Willem and Otto Willem Falck and letters in the Johan Warnar Falck Collection, also both housed in the Dutch National Archives; uncatalogued correspondence with Pieter Cornelis Hasselaer in the Hasselaer Collection in the Amsterdam Municipal Archives; the special collection of a hundred and twelve letters and notes in the Municipal Archives of Bordeaux exchanged between Falck and Louis Monneron, a French agent in Colombo between 1781 and 1784; correspondence with Guillaum Titsingh in the archive of the Classis Utrecht in the Utrecht Archives; correspondence with the secretary of the *Hollandsche Maatschappij voor Wetenschappen* (Dutch Society for Sciences) in Haarlem in the North Holland Archives in Haarlem and with Leiden professors in the University Library and the Herbarium of Leiden University respectively. In the National Archives in Kew in Great Britain all kinds of letters were found from family, friends and other relations among the so-called Prize Papers – part of the Archives of the High Court of Admiralty.