

Such a sudden and unexplained reversal of the policy pursued in this matter by the preceding Minister naturally excited feelings of dissatisfaction and distrust in the minds of the Natives. After having been told that in regard to this dispute they were to place themselves in communication with Mr. Buller, they all at once find, that Mr. Buller is in disgrace for having done his utmost to arrange it, and that at the very time when they most needed his assistance in arranging matters of detail, Mr. Buller is prohibited from affording it. Shortly afterwards, Mr. Buller is removed from Manawatu to Wanganui—a removal not objected to by Mr. Buller, simply because, I believe, he felt that his influence with the Manawatu Natives, and his power of usefulness in that district had been most materially diminished by the false position he had been placed in by Mr. Mantell. But Mr. Mantell next proceeds to re-arrange the Resident Magistrates Districts, and so divides them that he actually places one-half of the Ngatiraukawa tribe under the Resident Magistrate at Otaki, and the other half under the Resident Magistrate at Rangitikei, leaving the Manawatu—the centre of the Ngatiraukawa territory—without a Resident Magistrate. No one who knows anything of the Natives requires to be told that such an arrangement has necessarily proved fatal to the influence of both Magistrates, and has created such intense dissatisfaction amongst the Natives, that they have almost ceased to appeal to the Court, or if they do, that they treat its decisions with supreme contempt. The result of these proceedings is just what might have been by any one at all acquainted with the Natives confidently predicted—the administration of justice on the West Coast has virtually ceased. There is no one clothed with authority between Wellington and Wanganui who enjoys the confidence or possesses the slightest influence with the Natives. The Natives in fact are at a very critical period left to themselves, without any one to guide and advise them; and at no period has the influence of the General Government with the Natives on the West Coast been at so low an ebb.

In addition to these circumstances, all tending to irritate the Natives and to revive the quarrel among the three tribes, certain parties have for some time past been busily engaged in attempting to upset the adjustment of the dispute, by representing to the Natives that they had been overreached in their agreement with me,—that the exclusion of the Manawatu Block from the operation of “The Native Lands’ Act, 1862,” was such an act of injustice as fully justified them in repudiating all their engagements; and I am credibly informed, that one of these parties actually suggested that they should ask me an absurdly exorbitant price for the block, and that on my refusal to give it they should declare the bargain off.

It can scarcely be a matter of wonder that shortly after these proceedings, Mr. Mantell should receive a petition complaining of the injustice of the Manawatu Block being exempted from the operations of the Land Act; still less can it excite surprise, that Mr. Mantell should have returned the petition—rebuked the Natives for addressing it to him personally—reminded them that the proper course was to petition the Assembly—or should have given them minute instructions as to the form in which a petition should be got up: for I have heard on good authority, that the petition was not only suggested by the parties I have already alluded to, but that the names attached to it were all written by one Native. The original petition was returned to the Natives, not, I suspect, because it was informally addressed to Mr. Mantell, but because Mr. Mantell knew that if he presented it, the fact of one Native having written all the names must have been discovered, and must have discredited the petition and shown the influence to which it owes its origin.

It was not till some time after my return from the mission which I undertook on behalf of the General Government to Australia, that I became acquainted with the circumstances I have just narrated; nor do I believe that any of Mr. Mantell’s colleagues were fully cognizant of them or of their bearing. I immediately requested the Premier, that he would have the goodness to allow Mr. Buller to proceed to Rangitikei and Manawatu, with the view of at once checking and counteracting proceedings so certain to disturb the peace of the district. Mr. Weld at once placed Mr. Buller’s services at my disposal, and you will find from his reports, and from certain letters addressed to me by the leading chiefs of the three tribes, how entirely successful he was in his delicate and arduous mission. Suffice it here to say—after his interview with the Ngatiawas, all the leading men of that tribe addressed a letter to me, renewing in the most emphatic terms their agreement with me in regard to the block, declaring the absolute sale of the land, and pledging themselves not to molest the settlers’ stock, nor to demand rent pending the final settlement of the question. The Ngatiraukawa chiefs, whom Mr. Buller met at Rangitikei, also signed a declaration, pledging themselves in the most unequivocal manner, to abide by the terms of their agreement—to consider the land as absolutely sold—to interfere in no way with the squatters, and patiently to await my decision in respect to the rents. Ihakara, the leading chief of the Ngatiraukawa, whom Mr. Buller saw at Manawatu, and whose mind had been thoroughly poisoned by the representations already referred to, after a lengthened discussion also sent me a lengthy epistle, stating fully the grounds of his dissatisfaction, reporting his interview with Mr. Buller, and concluding with these words: “Our agreement respecting Rangitikei still holds good, because the land is firmly held in your hand, and because the land is in dispute between us and the Ngatiapa. Listen now. The cattle and the sheep of the Pakehas depastured on that land will not be seized or interfered with by us. It will be for you to decide respecting the rents.”

I received similar communications from the principal Rangitane chiefs, and from the chiefs of Oroua.

The present position then of the Rangitikei dispute is simply this: In spite of all attempts to induce them to withdraw from their agreement with me, the leading chiefs of the three tribes express themselves more strongly than ever in favour of the sale of the block as the only means of terminating the quarrel and preventing war, and declare their firm determination to adhere faithfully to all the terms of the agreement, and to leave the matter entirely in my hands.

Before I left for Australia, the understanding was that the questions of price and reserves should be arranged by March or April, when I was to hold a final general meeting of the three tribes. And I quite concur in Mr. Buller’s opinion, that if further tampering with the natives can be prevented, this long pending dispute will in all probability be brought to a satisfactory termination in the course of a few months.