

REPORT BY MR. G. S. COOPER.

Copy of a Letter from Mr. COOPER to the Hon. J. C. RICHMOND.

SIR,—

Napier, 14th August, 1867.

I believe I should be neglecting my duty were I to fail to draw the attention of the Government to the way in which the Natives of this Province are divesting themselves of the very valuable estate that remained to them after their extensive sales to the Crown.

The chiefs are allowed, indeed sometimes tempted to take credit without stint from merchants, tradesmen, and often from their own tenants, and this they do with the utmost readiness, and to an extent almost incredible. Some of the principal landowners are at this moment in debt to the amount of many thousands of pounds.

Then pressure is put upon them, and, seeing no other means of raising the money, they have begun to sell their land in every direction.

I am bound to say that the prices given for the lands are fair, and often high; and the negotiations are as a rule carried on in a legitimate and honest spirit by the European purchasers, who, certainly, having once given the credit, have a right to do their best to recover their own.

I do not, therefore, wish to be understood as imputing any blame to the Europeans in the matter.

But what I wish to point out is the duty that I conceive lies upon the Government of endeavouring to save, if possible, the Maori, from himself.

Suddenly permitted to exercise unrestrained control over his lands; rapidly acquiring, if he has not already acquired, an incurable habit of luxury and idleness which totally unfits him for gaining his own living; and surrounded by temptations to extravagance too strong for his easy and half-civilized nature to resist, the result is easily foreseen.

He has a means of payment ready at hand, consisting of a property whose acquisition cost him neither trouble nor expense. It is at present bringing him in a moderate income, it is true; but here is, on one hand, an urgent creditor threatening the terrors of the Supreme Court unless a sum of money, which he has no hope of obtaining by any means save one, is immediately paid; and, on the other, an offer, either from the urgent creditor, as is usually the case, or from some other capitalist, not only of money enough to pay the debt, but a few hundreds over. The step is soon taken, and so much land is gone. But the temptation to extravagance remains in full force, and the habit of it grows stronger daily. Having got out of one scrape so easily, merely by putting his name to a piece of parchment, he quickly and almost imperceptibly slides into another, to be also escaped from by a similar process; and so it goes on.

A future of pauperism, the details of which it is misery to look forward to, is therefore inevitable for the Maori race, in Hawke's Bay, at least, unless immediate steps be taken, in the spirit of the salutary legislation of last year, to place beyond the reach of the present generation a sufficient portion of the estate that remains to them in the various districts of the Province.

For this purpose I would recommend that the Government should not assent to the alienation of any reserve of the classes described in subsections two and three of section three of "The Native Lands Act, 1866," and that the provisions of section eleven should be liberally acted upon by the Judges of the Native Lands Court.

By these means I trust that a sufficient maintenance may be preserved for these Natives to keep them from sinking into abject poverty and becoming a burthen upon the State, while the greater part of the land will still remain open for sale to and profitable occupation by the European colonists.

I have, &c.,

The Native Secretary, Wellington.

G. S. COOPER.
