

Henry Alfred Smith, R.N., Despatching Officer to the New Zealand Government, examined by Mr. Hamel had been an Emigration Officer under the Commissioners for nineteen years, and for two years to the New Zealand Government. He has to see that ships offered are adapted for their service. Then he superintends the fitting out and provisioning, stowage of cargo—everything, in fact. He visited the “Cospatrick.” She was properly fitted, provisioned, and stowed. He went down nearly every day while the cargo was being put in. He should have objected to any cargo that was wrong. He goes and sees what it is for himself. He has power to object to anything under the charter-party with the owners, which gives more power than the Act of Parliament. On the charter-party being shown to him, he said there was no such clause in it, and that an old charter-party of two years ago was in his mind when he made the foregoing statement, and also when he inspected the ship. The old charter-party gave a power to object to cargo, but a good many ships had been sent out under the new charter-party. He had never objected to any cargo at any time except as to qualities.

By Mr. Dennistoun Wood: The character of the cargoes carried under the Commissioners was such as now. Oils and spirits, a general colonial cargo, were carried then. He did not remember any fire arising in an emigrant ship so laden, and the casualty to the “Cospatrick” was the only one he had ever had to do with. He in one case objected to a portion of salt in a ship, which was put in damaged. He never had objections from the owners of the ships to do anything he asked them to do. Had he seen anything objectionable in the cargo, he would have made the objection to it himself. About 100 vessels were chartered by the New Zealand Government last year, and they carried from 30,000 to 35,000 people. He was only speaking from guess. One ship ran on shore with all lives saved, and the “Cospatrick,” were the only two casualties. The Government of New Zealand chartered four of the ships entirely, taking the whole of the ships. They had not sufficient freight of their own; they employed brokers, and were then unsuccessful in filling the ships. The bulk of the requirements of the Colonial Government is railway plant, which alone would not be a suitable cargo. To send out an emigrant ship in ballast would treble the cost per head. It was a common thing for plundering by the crew or passengers to go on. From the evidence he had heard, he thought, as he had from the first, the fire came from plunder. It never could have originated in the boatswain’s locker, for it could not then have got into the lower hold so soon as it did.

By Mr. Wood Hill: The grating forward of the single-men’s compartment was put up by witness’s orders for the purpose of ventilation. He cut off the forward part of the ship because he did not think it a suitable place to keep the emigrants. The berths and fittings were made under his direction.

Mr. Wood Hill said Mr. Temple (of Shaw, Savill, and Co.) was present, if the Court wished to ask him any questions; but the Court, not desiring further evidence, was then addressed by counsel.

Mr. Wood Hill said if his friend meant to suggest the prohibition of general cargoes in emigrant vessels, the question was one of Imperial importance, and could not be decided from the result of this short inquiry, but was rather for one of those Commissions which his friend had lately assisted. As to the question of fact in this case, there was no evidence that the cargo was dangerous, and such a cargo had been commonly carried for many years without evil result. As to the cause of the fire, it would be better to leave it an open question than, in the absence of positive evidence, to come to any conclusion against the crew or the emigrants. Precautions had been taken by the owners against men with lights plundering the vessel, but if any suggestion could be made by the Court, Shaw, Savill, and Co. would be glad to attend to it.

Mr. Dennistoun Wood addressed himself to the observation of Mr. Cohen, that the Government should have chartered the whole of the vessel. There was no proof that the fire was due to the nature of the cargo, and the suggestion was impracticable. If the ships were to go out in ballast, emigration would be too expensive, and so, in order to make emigration safe, they would abolish it altogether. The Colonial Government was anxious to discover the cause, so as to assure emigrants that it would not exist in future. Unfortunately they had not succeeded.

Mr. Cohen said he imputed no blame to the Government of New Zealand, although he failed to agree with Mr. Wood in thinking it a subject of congratulation that the same system of emigration had been carried on for twenty years without improvement. He did not impute any blame to the shipowners. They directed a cargo to be shipped which was approved by the New Zealand Government and Her Majesty’s Government, and ordered it to be shipped by experienced stevedores. Nevertheless, 476 people had been lost. One would fancy that it was utterly impossible for an emigrant ship to catch fire, and yet we were told in this very case that the passengers and crew often plunder the cargo, and so cause special danger. He himself did not think the Government and the people of this country would remain inert, now that they knew we were in the habit of sending out large numbers of emigrants in wooden ships, under such circumstances that if a fire did break out it was almost certain that scarcely any would escape. The rapidity with which the fire spread from stem to stern showed that the load the ship carried was, in fact, a dangerous one. There was the boatswain’s locker full of inflammable matter, and underneath it coal. Next to that more coal, upon the coal oil, then light measurement goods, like paperhangings, with beer close by, and next spirits, and then, quite in the stern, paraffine oil. He did not suggest the theory of spontaneous combustion, but if such a ship once caught fire there was scarcely any means of escape. It was admitted, he said, that the boats could only save a third of the persons on board, and that being so, there is a life-and-death struggle for them, and the captain will not have them launched till the last moment, for they are sure to be swamped. As to the cause of the fire, he could not help thinking that the light goods of the bulkhead were pulled down (for there was nothing on the fore side to prevent it) to get to the beer. As to precautions for the future, it might be that if a ship carried this enormous number of emigrants, it ought to be an iron ship, and in water-tight compartments, or that the bulkheads, at least, ought to be of iron. It was an unfortunate circumstance in this case that there were planks which could be removed from the bulkhead, and so gave access to the entire hold. As to the boats, it did seem that nautical engineers might devise some means, whether by davits swung inboard or other appliances, for saving a greater number of lives; and generally by increasing the number of boats, diminishing the number of emigrants in one ship, and by fire drill, something might be gained.

Mr. Patteson then said, “We shall consider our report.”