

strong and able-bodied, but for many who from age or infirmity could not make a living at any more settled pursuit, but who prefer the free life, even with scanty earnings, of the gum-getter to the relief offered by the Charitable Aid Board. There is no saying how many have been thus kept off the public funds, but it is certain that the saving in charitable aid expenditure must have been considerable.

If gum-digging has been used as a means to settlement, it appears that the pretence of settlement has been used as a means of acquiring a gum monopoly. Complaints have been made that persons have taken up land ostensibly for settlement, and have proceeded to plough the ground so as to comply with the conditions of holding, but that the real object of this ploughing was merely to get the gum out, after which the holding would be forfeited, the surface gum having been taken out by the ploughing, and the surface indications by which an experienced digger judges of the prospects of finding more being obliterated by the same operation. This evil has been remedied by a recent resolution of the Land Board to the effect that no gum-land shall in future be open to selection. It may, however, be worth consideration whether, if adequate security were taken for *bona fide* occupation, it might not be desirable to facilitate the acquisition of a small area of ground for gum-digging in connection with a holding of cultivable land.

We come now to the consideration of one way, and a very important one, in which the effect of the industry has been entirely the reverse of beneficial to settlement. The present desperate condition of the northern roads is due chiefly to the gum traffic, including under that term the cartage of stores to the fields, as well as of gum from them. Other causes, such as, in some parts, the cartage of timber, have their share in the mischief, but the gum is chiefly responsible. In the Maori parts of the district, the surface of the ground which is supposed to indicate a line of road is reduced to a state scarcely describable, by the use of bullock drays, which, in proportion as they destroy the roads, require the services of a more numerous team of bullocks, and by this means the mischief is continually augmented. Some particulars relating to this subject may be found in various parts of the evidence; but it would be very difficult to pen any description which would enable the state of the roads to be realised. It is sufficient to say that their condition is now such as to render nugatory any prospect for future settlement which the North might otherwise have; that it largely increases the cost of carriage, and so renders living much more onerous to the gum-digger as well as the settler; that it wears out and destroys to a lamentable extent the livestock, to say nothing of the men engaged in the work of conveyance; that the county authorities and Road Boards have no adequate means of improving it, but are obliged to leave it a permanent and hopeless impediment to the progress and prosperity of the country.

We think it comes fairly within the scope and spirit of our inquiry to mention here some of the methods which have been suggested for the purpose of raising revenue sufficient to enable either the Government or local bodies to deal with this capital difficulty of the North.

1. The simple method of asking Parliament for money is, of course, one upon which we have nothing to say. Whatever there is to say upon it will, no doubt, be in due time said by the members for the districts concerned.

2. The rating of Crown and Native lands is also a proposal into the particulars of which we cannot enter. We may, however, remark that it is impossible for any one to travel in the winter through those parts of the country—usually the best parts—which are in the hands of the Maoris, without feeling a strong conviction that it is very unfair that they should contribute nothing to the maintenance of those roads which their owners have had so large a share in destroying, whilst the burden is left to fall upon the scanty and inadequate rates extracted from a few scattered and struggling settlers.

3. The erection of toll-gates has been recommended as one means of providing for road repairs. This proposal need not detain us here, the practical arguments for and against it being such as could be more adequately discussed by the County Councils. We think, however, that the suggestion is worthy of consideration, and that whatever objections may lie against the principle of toll-gates, the urgent and pressing character of the needs of the North in respect of roads must be held greatly to qualify any such objections.

4. A great deal has been said, and much controversy carried on, in relation to the proposal to put an export duty on the kauri-gum, as a means of raising revenue for road-construction and maintenance. Taking the export roughly at 8,000 tons, a duty of from £1 to £5 per ton would give a yearly revenue ranging from £8,000 to £40,000, according to the amount of the duty. A duty of £5 does not seem very high when compared with the fluctuations which frequently occur in the price of the article; but if the payment falls on the digger—which is doubted by many—it means a tax of 2s. 6d. a week upon all who get about $\frac{1}{2}$ cwt. of gum in that time.

Upon this question of the incidence of the tax, as well as its probable effect on the trade, very different opinions are entertained. The advocates of the tax admit that the imposition of an export duty on any article has generally been regarded as unwise. But they say when a country is practically the sole producer of any article, there appears no valid reason why that country should not levy an export duty upon the article in question. An example in point is, they consider, presented by Chili, which country produces by far the larger proportion of nitrates (having exported in 1890, no less than 1,028,000 tons) upon which the Chilean Government levies a heavy export duty, which contributes a very large sum towards the cost of Government. New Zealand, they consider, is in a very similar position with regard to its product and export of kauri-gum, with which it has been shown that no other gum has been able to compete. When, it is argued, an article like kauri-gum advances or recedes as much as £10 at a single auction-sale, an export duty of, say, £3 per ton will in no way affect its consumption. In this connection it is pointed out that the kauri-gum fields are in process of rapid exhaustion, and that though this product to the value of £6,000,000 has been dug from the soil and exported, it has conferred comparatively little permanent benefit on the colony in the form either of roads or of settlement on the land. For these reasons, and in view of the languishing state of settlement in the northern districts, mostly arising from the want of roads,