

That is the answer that was given to me—the ground of defence of the purchase. Now, I will ask the Committee whether, almost without exception, every sentence in that speech is not a scathing satire on the facts as we know them. Mr. Ritchie, who “had nothing to do with the matter,” crops up at every turn in the transaction. Later on, I will show the Committee where he does so. Then it is said that “if anything is found to be wrong” in the petition, &c., he will bear the odium. I ask the Committee, has not everything been found to be wrong? Again, if the petition is not proved to be “straightforward and honest”? Was there ever a greater satire upon the facts as we now know them? I ask the Committee, was there anything straightforward or honest about the petition from first to last? Was it “the opinion of the settlers of the district” that this land should be purchased, or was it only the opinion of Mr. Douglas, of Mr. Douglas’s nephew, and Mr. Douglas’s creditors. The Minister says that such a petition should not be treated with “derision, scorn, and contempt,” but I say it was precisely the class of petition that ought to have been treated with scorn and contempt, for it proposed to saddle the colony, at a heavy price, with a piece of land that the owner had quite failed to sell to anybody else. Had the petition been signed only by Mr. Douglas, and no one else, any Minister would have been on his guard, would have inquired closely into the nature of the land offered for purchase, and would have taken care to ascertain the true value. He would also have inquired whether the people of the district really wanted the land for settlement. If the Minister in this case had done so, he would have found that there was no desire whatever for this land. That is all I have to say on this point for the present.

Let us now come to the history of this petition. It was hatched in the office of Wright, Stephenson, and Co., who were Mr. Douglas’s general agents in other departments of his business. They held a second mortgage over the land as collateral security for advances they had themselves made on stock mortgages, with which we have no concern. This petition was written by Mr. Douglas, every word of it, at Mount Royal, his own home. The Committee knows that it was then sent by him to Wright, Stephenson, and Co., his agents, to be revised; then it was sent to Mr. Turnbull, his local agent at Clinton, to be further revised. By him the petition was sent back to Mount Royal, where a fair copy was written and transmitted to Wright, Stephenson, and Co., in order that they should have two copies type-written. This was done, and the copies forwarded on to the local agent, Mr. Turnbull, to get them signed. Mr. Douglas says he wrote the petition openly; that he made no secret of it in any way. In cross-examination, however, it appeared that what he called “openly” was within the knowledge of Wright, Stephenson, and Co., Mr. Turnbull, Mr. Begg, another agent, and, of course, the young man who wrote the fair copy. Well, we have got the petition to Clinton, in the neighbourhood of Pomahaka; it is in the hands of Mr. Turnbull, who employs a young man to go hawking it about the district to get it signed, a task which occupied three weeks. When he got the signatures he also got £12 from Mr. Douglas for his trouble. Mr. Turnbull also undertook to get signatures, and he also got £12 for his work.

*Dr. Fitchett*: Pardon me, the one £12 covers the expense.

*Mr. Green*: I certainly understood that there were two separate amounts of £12.

*Mr. Scobie Mackenzie*: Pardon me, they each got £12. I know it as a matter of fact, and it was clear in the evidence. I can say that I was aware each of them got £12 for hawking the petition through the district; the only difference is that “the young man,” according to Mr. Douglas, took three weeks over it, whereas Mr. Turnbull said it took him over four or five weeks. Mr. Turnbull, later, got another £40 in consequence of the sale of this land to the Government. It is at the same time only fair to say, and I desire to be fair, that his own contention was that part of this money was payment for work he had done for Mr. Douglas over a series of years. At the same time he admitted that, but for the purchase by the Government, he would not have got the money. So that it may properly be said this petition cost Mr. Douglas altogether £64. Here let it be noticed that in no sense whatever can this petition be said to have originated in the district. The evidence is conclusive that such was not the case; there was no meeting of settlers at any time, or of any kind, to request that the land should be purchased for settlement. No such suggestion proceeded from the locality in any form that the purchase of this land was desired by the settlers. None of the residents of the district have been brought before us to say so; no movement of any sort was got up which would indicate that there was a desire to have the land for settlement. No communication was made to the member for the district on the subject. The Committee will allow that, as a general rule, when a petition of this kind is to be got up for the benefit of a district, and the settlers want help, the first person to whom they apply is the member for the district. In fact, it is his duty to assist them in every way he can. On this occasion the member for the district was not communicated with, although he was specially able to give assistance. Nobody seemed to know anything about the petition except that it was there. There was a local paper in the district, published at Clinton, but that paper never had a word about this land, or suggested that it should be purchased for settlement, or that it was required for settlement. On the 25th of August, however, that is when the petition was signed, the local paper did publish an article puffing up the land and urging the Government to buy. Mr. Douglas wrote that article. He says the editor sought him out, and induced him to write the article. I think, however, it will be admitted that the man who was prepared to take such trouble in getting up this petition, and to lay out so much money on it, would not be likely to stick at the trouble of seeing the editor himself, and getting the article accepted by the editor. It is for the Committee to say which is the more likely story of the two. Then we perceive that there is a good deal of indignation among the settlers who had signed the petition when they found how it was got up, from whom it originated, and all the facts connected with it. We have had the evidence on this head of Mr. Stevenson, the manager of the Wairuna Estate. He signed the petition under the general belief that it was the right thing to do. Mr. Turnbull showed him it was “all right,” by first signing himself. He pointed out to Mr. Turnbull that there was no price mentioned. His evidence went to show that, in his belief, it would be a good thing to settle the land; that it would be better that industrious settlers should be upon it than that it should be in the hands of Mr. Douglas lying waste. He