

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

THURSDAY, 6TH SEPTEMBER, 1906.

WILLIAM EVANS, Grain-merchant, Timaru, examined. (No. 1.)

1. *The Chairman.*] In hearing evidence in connection with the important question before us, we have decided to hear the Millers' Association first, and the Committee desire as far as possible one representative of each interest affected to voice the opinions of the whole. I take it that you, at any rate, voice the opinions of the members of your association. After you have given your views a few questions will be put to you by various members of this Committee. We shall now be glad to hear what you have to say with regard to the proposed reciprocal treaty, and how it affects your interests?—I can only say, on behalf of the millers and the grain-merchants of the colony, that this reciprocity treaty, if given effect to, would be very injurious to our interests. The great mind which formulated these proposals is now at rest in the grave, and I feel satisfied that had my old friend Mr. Seddon been with us to-day he would, after explanation, have seen this matter in a different light so far as the grain and flour business of this colony is concerned. His object, no doubt, in making this proposal for a reciprocal treaty was to cement the friendship between the Australian Colonies and New Zealand. I presume that that was the great motive underlying the proposal, but there are so many far-reaching difficulties in the way that it would be almost impossible to satisfy everybody. I hold that it is a piecemeal sort of arrangement, and that if we were going to have intercolonial free-trade with preference to British goods it would be a very different matter. In that case it would alter the whole phase of the subject. Now, last year, according to an article in last night's *Evening Post*, there was £306 collected for duty on 6,126 centals of wheat. If New Zealand is made a free port hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of tons of flour will come in from Australia every year, except during periods of drought. The Australian wheat undoubtedly, we must all allow, is of a superior quality to our own. It is a harder wheat, and is earlier-matured owing to the difference of climate, and can be produced in rainy seasons much cheaper than in New Zealand for several reasons. For instance, say, three hundred miles inland from Adelaide land can be obtained at from 5s. to 10s. per acre, as against £15 to £20 an acre in New Zealand for good agricultural land. I see that the writer of the article I referred to mentions that we have 30 bushels of wheat to the acre in New Zealand, as against 10 to the acre in South Australia. Well, the conditions are so different in South Australia from those in New Zealand. I have heard Mr. Darling, who was the largest grain-merchant in Adelaide, say that sometimes they send their vessels two or three hundred miles along the coast, and grain which is growing in the field at night will be cut and put into bags and shipped to England the next day. They have machines in use there that will cut, winnow, thresh, and put the grain into the bags in one act. One of these machines will do about 35 acres a day. With the low price of land there, and working under such conditions as I speak of, it is, of course, very different from what happens in this colony. In New Zealand we have a humid climate; the wheat when it is cut down has to remain perhaps for weeks before being put into stack. In fact, in ordinary seasons stook-threshed wheat is not fit to grind—has to be put into the stack, and may perhaps remain there for two or three months. All these things have to be considered, and outsiders are not perhaps acquainted with them. Bran and pollard are much more saleable in Australia than they are here, and they command a much higher price than in New Zealand. The writer in yesterday's paper, whom I have before quoted, suggested blending our wheat with that of Australia. That, no doubt, would be very desirable; but, of course, every bushel of wheat imported here would be against the interests of the farmers, because there would be so much less to grow for the requirements of the colony. The farming interests, I contend, are very important. The wages paid amount to a large sum yearly, and a great deal of money is expended in carrying on the industry. If farmers are not successful the country is not successful; I look upon farmers as being the backbone of the colony. Wheat in New Zealand, up to the time of this rumpus, has been selling at from 3s. 4d. to 3s. 6d. per bushel f.o.b. in Canterbury, as against 3s. 2½d. in Australia; while the wheat there is sold bags free ours is sold with the bags extra, and this adds to the cost by 1½d. a bushel. Every ton of flour imported means a decrease of 48 bushels of wheat and upwards against the New Zealand farmer—that is, when the bran and pollard are taken into consideration. The price ruling for wheat in the United Kingdom is £1 8s. per quarter for New Zealand wheat—I think the present price will be £1 9s. or £1 9s. 6d. for Adelaide wheat—and our wheat would not bring the same price. I question very much whether we should get more than £1 7s. 6d. to-day. With all expenses paid that price ruling in the United Kingdom would only leave the New Zealand farmer about 2s. 8d. per bushel, as against the 3s. 4d. per bushel f.o.b. in Canterbury to-day. I as recently as to-day met Mr. Gow, the Government Trade Commissioner, who has just returned from Hong Kong, and he told me that American flour is now being delivered in Hong Kong at £7 5s. per ton, so that, so far as our exports are concerned, New Zealand has no chance of competing either with America or Australia.