

EAST COAST TRUST LANDS.

The history of this estate prior to the passing of "The East Coast Trust Lands Act, 1902," is that of continuous and costly litigation in the Native Land Court, the Supreme Court, and the Validation Court. When the Act came into operation the lands which became subject to it and passed to the Board constituted thereunder comprised a total area of 244,985 acres. There was a debt due to the Bank of New Zealand of £156,383 7s. 6d., besides a number of other debts amounting to nearly £16,000, and other outstanding claims. We understand that a very large proportion of this huge debt was incurred in litigation and for interest-charges.

For the purposes of this report it is sufficient for us to say that the history of the estate prior to 1902 will be found in the Law Reports and the records of the proceedings of the Validation Court, as well as in parliamentary papers. In 1901 the position became acute. The Bank of New Zealand was compelled to take steps to foreclose, and advertised several blocks for sale. Parliament intervened in 1902, and decreed the postponement of the sale for two years. A Board was constituted, with full powers to sell, lease, or mortgage the lands comprising the estate in order to redeem the existing mortgages to the bank. The harassing litigation of the past was rendered impossible by statute, and the Board was intrusted with the duty of administering the estate, of discharging the debt due to the bank, and of saving as much as possible to the Maori beneficiaries. The record of the Board's administration will be found in its reports to Parliament from 1903 to 1907. In August, 1905, it was able to announce the payment of the debt to the bank, and in August, 1906, the settlement of other outstanding claims. There was then left the important matter of the adjustment of accounts as between the various interests in the estate, the determination of the interests of the Maori beneficiaries in certain reserves, and the opening-up for settlement of the balance of the lands in the estate.

It will be seen from the schedule that the area of land sold was 51,870 acres, and the area now held for the beneficiaries is 186,388 acres, of which 60,768 acres have been leased, 33,786 acres have been set aside for Maori occupation, and 91,834 acres are available for lease or for Maori occupation as may hereafter be determined. It must be borne in mind that the lands are not all in Cook County, nor are the Maori beneficiaries confined to that county; some of them are Maoris living at Opotiki, while the Mahia, Nuhaka, and Wairoa Maoris are largely interested in the Mangapoike and Mahia lands included in the estate.

The lands are now administered by a Commissioner, who takes the place of the Board. He is armed with all powers, assisted to some extent by the Validation Court, necessary to enable him to open the balance of the estate for settlement by way of sale or lease. As to the areas reserved for Maori occupation, he is in a position to assist the Maoris financially, while retaining general powers of management. The bulk of the undisposed-of lands are in the backblocks, and are difficult of access at present.

During our investigations the owners of Mangaokura Block, in the Waiapu County, expressed a desire that the block should be reserved for Maori occupation and leased to one of the beneficiaries; but we are of opinion that the land is not suitable for Maori occupation, and that it should be leased to the general public. Portions of the Maungawaru blocks are owned by Maoris residing in the Waiapu County, who desire their interests to be sold. These are matters for the consideration of the Commissioner. We may say that the lands comprising this estate are excluded from the operation of "The Native Land Settlement Act, 1907."

WHANGARA BLOCK.

The area of this block remaining to the Maoris, as shown in the Second Schedule, is 12,325 acres, or thereabouts, of which all but 679 acres has been leased. Mr. H. C. Jackson administers the block under decree of the Validation Court dated March, 1899, which appointed him sole Receiver, with power to execute leases and other necessary documents whenever so directed by the Validation Court. He receives and disburses the rent, and manages one farm for the Maoris. Accounts are rendered to and audited by the Validation Court. The area leased is 11,646 acres, at