

1910.

NEW ZEALAND

CANTERBURY PASTORAL RUNS,

THE LICENSES OVER WHICH TERMINATE ON FEBRUARY 28, 1911

(REPORT OF INSPECTION OF), BY MR. GUTHRIE.

Laid on the Table of the House of Representatives by Leave.

MR. ROBERT GUTHRIE to the Hon. the MINISTER OF LANDS.

SIR,—

Lands Office, Christchurch, N.Z., 19th October, 1909.

After careful inspection of all the pastoral country mentioned in our itinerary, I beg to submit for your consideration the following statements and recommendations. As my colleagues and myself were unable to agree on our views, on the first run we discussed, as to subdivision; and as, from my long practical experience of this class of country, especially in the Mackenzie country, I intended, in any circumstances, supplementing the report with various local matters which my colleagues did not consider themselves sufficiently capable of expressing an opinion on, we therefore agreed that it might probably be better, and certainly would save a considerable waste of time discussing these matters, for us to draft separate reports.

Before entering upon the discussion of the subdivision of the various runs that came under our inspection I should like to place on record the fact of what was, to any one interested in the welfare of the Dominion, a very sad sight—viz., so many abandoned homesteads, and so little—so very little—improvement put on these Crown lands after an occupancy of fifty years and more. The question at once arises in one's mind, after witnessing this sad state of affairs in a young and vigorous Dominion like New Zealand, where the population is steadily increasing in nearly every other district, why should it be here steadily and quickly decreasing? And why, where thirty years ago there were many comfortable smiling homesteads, should there be now only the ruins left to mark the spot, with generally a patch of fruit-trees showing, through all this decay, a vigorous growth and good promise of plenty? Is this state of affairs the fault of the lessees of these runs? In my opinion it is not. Owing to the insecurity of tenure under which this class of country is held, the lessees are doing as every one else would do under the same conditions, taking all out of the land and putting as little as possible back. If this country is to be improved, and the *bona fide* population increased, as it should be, besides judicious subdivision there must also be a certain amount of security of tenure, and that can only be done by completely altering the present system of tenure under which this class of country is held.

Having lived in the Mackenzie country for the last thirty-four years, and being thoroughly conversant with this state of affairs, I have for some years given considerable thought to the best modes of dealing with this class of land so as to get the best results both for the *bona fide* lessee and for the State. In my opinion, the bulk of the country we have inspected is suitable for *bona fide* settlement, as laid down under the present conditions of the small-grazing system of tenure, and I therefore think this part of it should be dealt with in the new leases under this system of tenure, with certain necessary amendments. It would be necessary to abolish the present maximum area of second-class small grazing-runs, so that any run could be dealt with under this system irrespective of its area; and, as this would be the initiation of a new system of dealing with this class of country, and naturally it may be dealt with in larger areas during the first term of lease than might be considered judicious for all time, I think an amending clause should be inserted giving the State the right, if considered necessary, to further subdivide at the end of every twenty-one years; the lessee in occupation to have a continual right of renewal of the homestead at revaluation, and sufficient area to more than comfortably keep a family. This would give security of tenure, and also safeguard the locking-up of the land from the naturally increasing population. It would mean that the country would be, without further legislation, automatically opened for closer settlement as the increased population demanded this. (I have always held that a clause of this kind inserted in the 999-years clause of the Land for Settlements Act would have been a wise provision, which would have avoided a very great deal of future worry and trouble to the State.)

Now, in giving compensation for improvements at the end of the lease, in my opinion, in this class of country, the increased carrying-capacity should be considered the most important improvement: and I certainly think that the State should seriously consider this matter, and try to arrive at some satisfactory conclusion in regard to this most difficult and important question. In reading the evidence given before the Royal Lands Commission a few years ago I note that

some of the witnesses favoured the State paying a percentage of the actual outlay on grass-seed sown. I am afraid this would not be satisfactory, as a great deal of money might be expended in this way without any beneficial results. If compensation is given, it must only be given on the actual results, as shown by the increased sheep-carrying capacity, and not by the amount of money that may have been expended, judiciously or injudiciously.

The means of increasing the sheep-carrying capacity of this class of country are various, and the best results are not always to be got from the sowing of different grasses. There is no doubt that certain grasses being sown on certain classes of this land will increase the carrying-capacity slightly; but on the dry, steep, warm north-west faces, where the regrassing is most important, I know of no grasses that I have tried or heard of being tried that have been successful in the slightest degree. In my opinion there is only one way of improving the grass on this the most important part of the country, and that is by fencing the land, and keeping all stock off during the summer months till the seed of the indigenous grasses falls. There are no grasses that will improve this particular class of country so quickly and permanently as the grasses indigenous to the land that have been partially eaten out and destroyed through want of fencing to safeguard them at a critical time. Any practical hill sheepman knows that sheep—and more particularly merinos—if allowed to roam over a large scope of unfenced country, will almost starve, picking out the sweet roots of the different grasses on these sunny facings, rather than go on to the dark facings where there is abundance of juicy grass; and yet these sheep, if fenced on to these shady facings, do very well in the warm summer months, just when it is important that the dry sunny facings should be saved. Judicious fencing and light stocking are the two factors that will play the most important part in increasing the carrying-capacity of this country. At the same time it is most important that every means, in the way of experimenting with different grasses, should be tried to get the most suitable grasses for this class of country.

Having stated that compensation for increasing the carrying-capacity of the different runs should be given, and shown some of the methods by which the carrying-capacity can be increased, the most difficult part of the question now arises—as to how this compensation can be given, and given in a manner fair and equitable both to the lessee and to the State. I do not pretend to have arrived at the correct solution of this most difficult problem, but I will give my views: I have no doubt they can be improved upon, and eventually, if the State is in earnest in this matter, I am quite sure they will satisfactorily solve the difficulty.

For the first two or three years of the new leases the runs should be carefully inspected by a thoroughly competent man, who would note the number of sheep being carried on each run, and whether it was being overstocked or understocked. His detailed report would then be carefully filed for reference at the end of the lease. For the two or three years at the end of the lease the same mode of procedure would be adopted, and on comparing the two reports the lessee in occupation would be entitled to compensation in accordance with the increased carrying-capacity. I am aware that the system I have described has its defects; yet it may be the groundwork for arriving at a better solution of this most important question.

I would also suggest that a further amendment be made to the present laws regulating the small-grazing-run system of tenure, and that is this: Where the present lessee is prepared to comply with the new regulations, if his present run is not subdivided he should have a preferential claim to a renewal of lease without competition at a fair revaluation; where the run is subdivided, the present lessee to have a preferential claim to the homestead block without competition at a revaluation. In my opinion it would serve no good purpose, but rather the contrary, to displace a tried and probably a good settler, and run the risk of getting a new man and probably a worse settler.

Another amendment I would suggest is that the State have the right at any time, given one year's notice and full compensation for improvements, to acquire all or part of any run, if required for any other purpose than pastoral farming. My object in suggesting this is that I think some parts of the Mackenzie country offer great possibilities for successful fruit-growing in the near future. The general configuration of the plains lends itself to easy and cheap irrigation from the large rivers; and it is sincerely to be desired that the Government may, at an early date, do a little experimenting in this direction.

Another necessary amendment, in a barren, treeless country like this, is that some inducement—compulsory or otherwise—should be given the tenants to plant trees. It might not be considered a great hardship to make it compulsory that some little annual tree-planting be done—say a minimum of one acre annually; and, by way of inducement to greater efforts, the State might find the trees free of cost to the nearest railway terminus.

There is also a small percentage of the country that we have inspected that may not be considered as yet suitable for dealing with under the small-grazing-run system of tenure—land from which, for the present, the best results could be got by stocking it only in summer, and taking the sheep (or a large percentage of them) down country to winter. This, of course, would have to be dealt with under a special system of tenure, as the lessees of this country would preferably be men who held down-country farms, where they could keep their stock during the two dangerous months. I would suggest that this country also be let by ballot for fourteen years only, the only conditions being that a ring fence be erected during the first two years; that tree-planting in the same proportion as other tenures be done; that compensation be given at the end of lease for all improvements, but no guarantee of right of renewal. This country should be leased optional to either system of tenure, and if a lessee were prepared to take it up under the first system of tenure he should have the preference.

I may say, in connection with this land, that, although in its present state it is dangerous in bad winters, yet there is any quantity of land suitable for growing turnips and hay to save the stock during a heavy snowstorm, if the tenant is only willing to cultivate.

The present lessee on this class of country should also have a preferential claim to a block at revaluation without competition.

I shall now deal in detail with the subdivisions of each separate run; but before doing so I should like to say that I have invariably made the subdivisions in such a manner as to insure that each division shall have an equal, or nearly equal, proportion of winter or safe country, and that there shall be no danger of any waste country being left in the hands of the State. In every case, with the subdivisions suggested, the safety of the runs during a bad snowstorm will be increased many fold, as compared with their present state.

Run No. 75: Swardon Station.

This run comprises 27,100 acres of grass land, and its easy carrying-capacity is about 9,000 sheep. The nearest part of it is ten miles from a railway terminus; the main Fairlie—Mount Cook motor-road goes through the centre of it for eleven miles. From the configuration of this run, and from the nicely proportioned areas of winter country on each block, it lends itself to easy subdivision in three blocks. As it is already nearly all subdivided by fences on the lines indicated, the first outlay for necessary expenses would be very slight. The three homesteads would be practically on the base of operations, if it were necessary to shift any sheep during an exceptionally heavy snowstorm; and, as the main road is kept clear of snow by the County Council's snow-plough, if the worst came, every sheep could be easily taken down country in a few days without any loss. In the two blocks most distant from the railway terminus there is plenty of fair land suitable for growing sufficient hay and turnips to keep all the stock during the two dangerous months. The carrying-capacity of the different divisions would be as follows: Block nearest Fairlie, 1,500 sheep; the other two blocks, about 3,700 sheep each. Each of these blocks will keep a family comfortably. I suggest that a fair rent would be £250 per annum. The rentals of the different blocks could be adjusted on this basis when the different areas were correctly known. I can guarantee a keen demand for these small runs from practical men. I have drawn a pencil-line as near as possible on the places of the divisions I have suggested. This run surrounds the Township of Burke's Pass. I may also add that part of the Ashwick Station, Swardon Gully, and Mount Edwards, adjacent to the Swardon Run, can only be properly worked by being added to these runs when Ashwick lease falls in. I would recommend this being done.

Run No. 76: Tekapo Station.

This run comprises 27,900 acres, and carries easily 9,000 sheep. Its nearest part to the railway terminus is twenty miles on a good road. This run could be very easily divided in two—in fact, it is fenced in the proper place already, each division having an equal proportion of winter country. There will be plenty of land on both runs suitable for growing hay and turnips, to insure the safety of all the stock in a bad winter. There is also a good block of Ashwick Station lying very convenient to these runs, and I would suggest this being added to them when the Ashwick lease falls in. Although this run, divided in two, gives ample land and to spare to keep any two moderate families, without the addition of the Ashwick Block, yet, to make the best use of the Ashwick country, this is the only way to deal with it. I would also suggest that a road-line, for stock-driving purposes only, be given from the main road on the east side of Edwards Creek to fence boundary. This would make it very convenient to take stock down country.

Run No. 77: Richmond Station.

This run comprises an area of 87,000 acres, and is one of the best summer-grazing runs in the Mackenzie Basin, and probably the worst and most dangerous in the whole basin for losing sheep in the winter snowstorms. The greater part of this country consists of long slopes and table country and broken downs; but, unfortunately, the greater portion of it has a partial southerly aspect. This, and its general flatness, make it bad country for snow clearing quickly. There is, however, any quantity of good land most suitable for growing hay and turnips; and it is only a question of moderate expense to grow sufficient feed to insure, in all probability, the safety of the stock in the worst winters. It could easily be subdivided in two runs, and if worked as described would be fairly safe. On the other hand, as this country, from its general flatness and good grazing qualities, is specially adapted for leasing under the fourteen-years tenure, it could for this purpose be cut in three or four blocks, and, I am sure, be readily leased to down-country graziers. A fair rent for this run would be £350 per annum. The sheep-carrying capacity is about 17,000.

Run No. 78: Lilybank Station.

This run comprises 70,000 acres, and has a sheep-carrying capacity of 6,000. It consists chiefly of high, rough, mountainous country, and only a very small proportion of it is reasonably safe in a bad winter. There is a small portion of excellent land that could grow hay and turnips sufficient to tide over the worst winters. It is impossible to subdivide this run, for want of suitable fence-lines. It can only be leased in one block, and a fair rent would be £130 per annum.

Run No. 80: Mistake Station.

This run comprises 62,000 acres of very high mountainous country. About ten miles of Lake Tekapo and Godley River facings lie well to the sun, and are fairly safe country in the worst winters, although part of this is, in heavy snowstorms, subject to avalanches, and these may cause a heavy mortality in the sheep depasturing on the facings. The other parts of this run, comprising more than three-fifths of the whole, are only summer country. This run could be well subdivided in two, and a fair proportion of winter country could be given to each run; but it is absolutely impossible to get a fence-line that would stand even one winter. I would therefore recommend that it be leased again in one run. A fair rent would be £300 per annum. The sheep-carrying capacity is 14,000.

Run No. 79: Glenmore Station.

This run comprises 53,000 acres, of approximately one-third high country and two-thirds downs country. This is a well-grassed run, and will make two excellent runs. The safe winter facings are well proportioned on the two runs. There is at present a line of fence dividing the run at the correct place where it should be divided. This would mean a very small outlay at the beginning for the new settler. The sheep-carrying capacity is about 13,000 to 14,000, and I think a fair rental would be £360 per annum. There is plenty of good ground fit for growing hay and turnips on both blocks. These divisions I can guarantee to make two excellent safe runs.

Run No. 81 and Run No. 82, known as Balmoral Station.

This comprises 69,000 acres. A fourth of this country consists of high rough ranges, and the balance long flat slopes, with mostly a southerly aspect. The safe winter country on these two runs is what is known as the "Jollie River facings": it is very good, warm, and generally safe country, but the proportion to the summer country is small. The other winter country is at the other end, near to the Balmoral Homestead, and, although very good, is not in proportion to the summer country. These two runs can be cut into three runs with a certain measure of safety. Given a fair proportion of summer country with the Jollie River facings, that would make one safe run; given what is known as the "Old Man Range facings" and all the country to the south of these facings, including the present home, that would make another safe run; given a block out of the centre of these, say about 20,000 acres, to the present lessee of Tekapo Run, as his preferential block, that would be the third division. My reason for recommending this is that, besides being the lessee of Tekapo Run, he also owns a freehold farm of 1,500 acres of first-class agricultural land on the Braemar country adjacent to this Balmoral country; and with his agricultural land he could farm this block of country with a greater degree of safety than any other person. By doing this we should get an extra settler in the district, which is, of course of primary importance. The only other way to deal with this block would be to lease it on the fourteen-years tenure for summer grazing only. There is plenty of land to grow hay and turnips all over the country. The rental should be about £400 per annum.

Run No. 83: Mount Cook Station.

This comprises 25,000 acres of very rough country, with some good warm winter facings. It is impossible to subdivide it, and it should be leased again as one run. The sheep-carrying capacity is 6,000 sheep. A fair rental would be £200 per annum. This is, on the whole, a very safe winter run.

Run No. 89: Glentanner Station.

This comprises 58,000 acres of high, steep country, with a fair amount of good flats and swamps. Nearly all of this country lies beautifully to the sun, and it is probably one of the most safe runs in a bad winter, if not the safest run, in the Mackenzie Basin. It will carry easily 10,000 sheep, and should certainly be divided in two; it will make two excellent safe runs. Very little fencing will be needed to make the divisions. A fair rental would be £350 per annum.

Run No. 86: Simon's Pass Run.

This comprises 30,600 acres, consisting of a low well-grassed range and a large partially barren flat. It is very seldom that the snow gives any trouble on this run. The worst trouble is the drought. Except in very dry years, the sheep will do well on this country, and generally there are good lambings. There is plenty of good ground for growing hay and turnips, and with a little of this ground under cultivation every year this station may be considered safe from snowstorms. One drawback to this run is the large proportion of poor flats; and, unfortunately, there is a grub that has been gradually killing out the silver tussock on this run for the last twelve or fifteen years. There are thousands of acres with hardly any vegetation left. The same applies to other Mackenzie poor flats, only in a lesser degree. (I shall refer to this grub later on.) This run can be divided in two, and make two absolutely safe runs. The present Government Rabbit Agent's homestead (which, I understand, is to be abandoned at the end of the present leases) would make a homestead for the second tenant. Taking into consideration the ravages of the grass-grub, I think the present rental is quite sufficient. The sheep-carrying capacity is 10,500.

Run No. 85: Wolds Station.

This comprises 42,300 acres, consisting of a long, low, well-grassed range of safe winter country, with a great deal of beautiful, safe, broken downs on the shores of Lake Pukaki. The only bad, cold country on this run is the Tekapo River flat. Right through this run are excellent blocks of land, well suited for growing hay and turnips. This land should certainly be divided into three runs; and, if a small portion of the agricultural land on each of these blocks is utilized as it should be, each run will be absolutely safe in any snowstorms. I may add that it is only on very rare occasions that this station gets a heavy fall of snow. The rental of this run should be £500, and its carrying-capacity is about 17,500.

Run No. 84: Irishman Creek Station.

This comprises 23,500 acres, consisting of a long narrow strip of country from Pukaki Lake to Tekapo River. The safe winter country on this run is the slopes and downs on the lake-side. About half this run, next the Tekapo River, is cold country, with a southerly aspect. This run could not very well be divided in two, owing to the winter country being all at the one end. To distribute the winter country for two runs would entail a great deal of fencing, and then it would be unsatisfactory for one of the tenants, particularly for a homestead-site. I would recommend that it be dealt with as one run. It has a sheep-carrying capacity of about 7,000, and a fair rental would be £250 per annum.

Run No. 93A: Glenlyon Station.

This run is on the northern shore of the upper end of Lake Ohau, and on the Dobson and Hopkins Rivers. It consists of 124,000 acres; 76,000 acres is bush and barren country. From its position it is most un-get-at-able. There is only one portion of the lower end fit for putting sheep on in the winter, and then it is not very safe. This run should be let under the fourteen-years tenure, as it is chiefly summer country. There are a few large and very good swamps in the valleys that cattle do very well on. The sheep-carrying capacity of this run I could not definitely state—possibly 6,000 or 7,000 in the winter and 20,000 or more in the summer. It will carry, besides these, say 800 head of cattle. A fair rent would be £240 per annum.

Run No. 70: Haldon Station.

This run, as at present occupied, comprises 37,200 acres of Crown land, and a frontage on this is 13,238 acres of Education reserve. The Education-reserve part of this run, and also some of the lower end of spurs of the Crown land, is practically barren. The only vegetation that seems to be growing on this country is sorrel, which the sheep, particularly the ewes, do very well on to, say, the middle of November. After that, I understand, this country is absolutely devoid of any vegetation for the remainder of the summer months. As this station is inside what is known as the "very dry belt" in the Mackenzie Basin, this run—the Crown land of it—is not often subject to snowstorms: the greatest drawback is the drought. The higher and farther you go back on this run, the better the tussock; and from its low, warm aspect, the sheep do remarkably well on this country. It could be easily divided into three good safe runs, without considering the Education-reserve block at all; yet it would be considerably better if the whole of the Education reserve in this basin could be subdivided in conjunction with the Crown lands. One very good point would be that most of the homesteads would be on the present main road. The Education reserve on this run is, by itself, practically useless. If the Education reserve were run in conjunction with the Crown land, I would suggest that the present lessee get one-third, or nearly one-third, as his share of the present Crown block, along with part of the Education reserve.

I might here point out that the present lessee came all over the run with us, giving us the benefit of his local knowledge as to where the best subdivisions could be made. He also expressed himself to the effect that, notwithstanding how much he would like to get back the whole of his run, yet he recognized that the time had come when, in the interest of the Dominion, a run of this size should be carrying at least three families instead of one; and that any official of the Government could have his assistance in the shape of his knowledge of the best way to subdivide the run for the benefit both of the State and of the lessee.

Run No. 72: Grampian Station.

This is probably the best station in the Mackenzie country, and comprises 45,000 acres, and almost every acre specially well grassed. It is situated on the sunny side of the Mackenzie Basin, not often subject to damaging snowstorms nor yet to droughts; it seems to strike the happy medium. The front or warm winter facings are already divided into three blocks, with the back country cut off. If offered in three runs—which I certainly think should be the minimum number—all that would be required would be two lines of fencing through the back country to give proportionate areas to the three runs. This run is about thirty miles from the railway terminus, on a splendid road. The carrying-capacity is 19,000 sheep, and a fair rental would be £1,000. There is plenty of good agricultural land in every block.

Run No. 73: Gray's Hill Flat.

This comprises 26,000 acres, and is part of the present Gray's Hill Station, the balance being Education reserve. There is a good part of this flat almost waste land, partly owing to the ravages of the grass-grub. Still, there is some very good land, and land that would grow good oats and turnips along the east side of the flat. If let in one block it would readily find a tenant. As it could be easily divided, probably if offered in two blocks it would find tenants. I think £170 would be a fair rental per annum.

Run No. 74: Whalesback Station.

This comprises 32,500 acres, consisting of the Dalgety Range, with a considerable amount of rather poor cold flats. The range itself is high country, but there is a great deal of good sunny facings on it, and splendid winter country. The nearest end will be about twelve miles from Albury Railway-station. It would make two good safe runs, and probably three. £600 per annum is a fair rental.

This is the last of the Mackenzie runs that we had to deal with.

Grass-grub.

In connection with the grass-grub already briefly referred to, we did not find it anywhere except in the Mackenzie Basin. The worst place was Simon's Pass Flat, near Pukaki River. It was also very strongly in evidence on the Wolds Station, and also on Gray's Hill and Whalesback Flats. The place where it strikes strongest is the very poorest and driest flats. In my opinion, the reason why it is making so much headway on the most barren ground is that the tussocks on this barren country are so far apart that they are never able to be burnt in a general burning; consequently, through never being burnt, they gradually amass a great deal of decayed tussock round their roots. That, in a very dry district, generally kills the tussock without any assistance from the grub; but this great mass of dry decayed tussock is the saviour of the grub in the winter months: he can lie here through the coldest and most severe frosts, and be ready to come forth in the spring with all his energy.

There are some people who think that this grub will gradually devastate the whole country. That is not my opinion, because, as soon as this barren country is left, and one comes into good land, the ravages of this grub cease; and I think the reason is that where the tussock is regularly burnt there is no protection for the grub against the winter frosts, and naturally it will be killed at this point. I saw one place where it had left the flats and gone for a short distance up the hill; but this was on a poor piece of land where the same conditions existed as on the flats. There is on some of the flats—the more moist ones—where the silver tussock is all dead, a fair sprinkling of blue tussock coming up.

I do not know if anything could be done to stop the ravages of this grub; but I think it would do a certain amount of good if runholders would do their best to have all the tussocks carefully burnt over a good width of country round the fringe of the ground that this grub is devastating.

I understand the Government is going to experiment on patches of this country, to find suitable grasses for regrassing it. I am afraid it will be very difficult to find grass that will strike on this cold dry country. I would suggest experimenting with scrub or bushes of some kind—anything that would give a slight shelter to the grasses till they got a start—or planting trees. Some of this barren country will grow fruit-trees, and the water for irrigation purposes is very convenient.

Plantation, &c., Reserves.

Through the most of the Mackenzie country runs that we have inspected there are a great many plantation and other reserves. These reserves when first made were let by tender to the highest tenderer. I think this is a great mistake. I would suggest that on whatever run there is a reserve the lessee should have the first refusal at a fair rental. My reason for saying that the present system is objectionable is that these reserves are selected on the most favoured places, generally good winter facings, and the fact of some of them being fenced in may seriously damage for winter grazing a very large tract of good winter country, through stopping the regular and natural movements of the sheep on a sunny facing. I know of one that is particularly damaging to the run it is on.

Stock-camps.

I would recommend that, before re-leasing these runs, stock-camps should be reserved at all necessary places. If the Mackenzie County Council, which knows the local conditions, were consulted in this matter, they would be able to give valuable information.

Roading.

I may add, in conclusion, in connection with the Mackenzie runs, that all homestead-sites on the different suggested subdivisions, as recommended, will be practically on present good roads. There will practically be no special money required for roading, and if the fourths or even fifths of these rents are returned to the public bodies, as at present, on a small-grazing-run system of tenure, all the tenants will be able to have carriage-drives to their homesteads by the time the money ceases.

Rabbits.

Fifteen years ago the rabbit had practically taken possession of the Mackenzie Basin, ruining many runholders, and permanently destroying some of the finest grasses on some of the runs. On our inspection of the country we saw very slight indications of the rabbit. He is now absolutely conquered. The runholder has now no dread of him. Systematic poisoning and the natural enemy have done the work. The present expense of keeping rabbits under is hardly worth mentioning.

THE ASHBURTON COUNTY.

Before proceeding to give my views on the runs in the Ashburton County, I might state that, with the exception of Mesopotamia, I have not previously been over any of these runs; and, although the general configuration of this country, and also the grasses thereon, are very similar to the Mackenzie country, yet there are always certain local conditions, such as certain belts of country subject to heavier falls of snow than other parts, and various other matters that the stranger may fail to note. These things can only be known correctly by the man who has lived in the district for some considerable time. Therefore I speak with more hesitation in connection with this country than when dealing with the Mackenzie-country runs, amongst which I have spent a lifetime. In fact, I think, in a work of this sort, it would at all times be a great advantage to have men on the Commission with local knowledge of the country inspected. It is difficult enough for the man who has a thorough practical knowledge of this class of country to conscientiously satisfy himself that he has made no mistake; but for any one without previous knowledge, practical or otherwise, of this class of country to presume to be a judge of it, in a quick and cursory inspection such as we have had to make is, in my opinion, absurd.

The most material difference I note between the Mackenzie country and the country we have inspected in the Ashburton County is that this country is more confined than the Mackenzie. The gorges are considerably narrower, and the sun has not the same power on this country, although the configuration is similar. Here, unfortunately, the facings in most parts that lie well to the sun are so much overshadowed by the higher ranges at the back that the supposed sunny facings do not get the amount of sun that, on first inspection, one would think they did. In short, generally speaking, this country is not so well favoured as the Mackenzie. These remarks do not apply to Double Hill Station.

The following are the details I wish to bring before you with regard to the runs in the Ashburton County:—

Runs 111A and 110B, known as Mesopotamia Station.

All the good frontage of these runs are College reserves, and it is quite impossible to deal with them separately. I would recommend that either the College or the State take over the whole, when the country could be dealt with to advantage in possibly three or four runs.

Run No. 111: 18,500 Acres.

Twelve thousand acres of this is barren, and the grassy part is purely summer country.

Run No. 112; Strounschrubie: 17,000 Acres, of which 7,000 Acres is barren.

I would recommend that these two runs, No. 111 and No. 112, be offered as one run. At a fair rental a good living could be made. There is some very good land on Run No. 112 that would grow hay and turnips well. It would be quite useless to offer No. 111 by itself, there being practically no winter country thereon.

Run No. 114: 26,000 Acres, of which 10,900 Acres is barren.

This run is known as Potts Country or Hakatere Station No. 2. There is a fair proportion of fairly good winter country on the Potts River, and also on the Rangitata River frontage. There are also some very good flats, and a fair quantity of land fit for growing turnips and hay. The River Potts on one side would form a good natural boundary, and there is a fence on the other side. This run, leased in one run, would make a very fair run, but it would not do to subdivide it.

Run No. 113; Hakatere Station: 54,700 Acres, of which 17,000 Acres is barren.

This run has some fair winter facings on the Ashburton River, and on the lower end there are a few good facings; but there is a tremendous area of cold high country, and in my opinion the run could not be profitably subdivided. There is certainly some fair land on the lower end that could well be utilized for growing winter feed, but I would not recommend this run to be divided.

Run No. 116, known as Dunbar's: 25,000 Acres.

This run has some very fair winter country on the facings of the Cameron River, and also some small patches at the lower end. There is also some fair swamp land, and a prettily situated but partially abandoned homestead on the shores of Lake Heron. Some good ground for cultivation could be got. I would recommend this being leased in one run.

Run No. 117; Lake Heron Station: 37,500 Acres, with 13,800 Acres barren.

This run all lies at a very high altitude. It is the watershed of the Ashburton and Rakaia Rivers. The chief winter country on this run is some very steep facings on the Rakaia River. From their configuration I should think that, although they would clear of snow very quickly, yet sometimes the stock would be subject to heavy losses from avalanches. The only other piece of country on this run that I should consider in any way safe in heavy snow is the north-west faces of a round conical-shaped hill standing by itself on the shores of Lake Heron. This piece might keep 1,000 sheep through a medium snowstorm. There is good ground for cultivation, but at present I could not recommend this station being divided.

Runs No. 118 and No. 119, known as Double Hill Station.

These runs are worked as one run at present, comprising 113,000 acres, 29,500 acres of this being barren country. The thirty-miles frontage on the Rakaia River of these runs is far and away the best country we have inspected, both as to aspect and superior grass. This frontage is absolutely safe in the worst of winters, and a large proportion of the soil is of such good quality that it would grow almost anything. Were it not for the danger of rabbits and noxious weeds, it would pay to abandon the back country altogether, and settle the front, as only about three fencing-lines could be got through the back country which would be at all safe to stand the winter snows and shifting shingle. Leasing it separately, four runs is the most that could be got. Another method might be adopted satisfactorily—viz., to let the frontage in small blocks, say, from 12 to 18 blocks, and to leave the back country divided into two blocks as it is at present, and make the back blocks a commonage for the front settlers. I am sure that conditions could easily be drafted that would make this system work without any trouble or friction, and a prosperous settlement could be created with hardly any expenditure to the State. It would be necessary to make the road up to the settlement on the south side of the river, but this would not be very difficult or expensive. The enhanced value received as rent for the settlement would more than pay interest on the cost of the road.

Run No. 178, known as Lake Coleridge Station: 12,200 Acres of fairly Good Land.

This run is bounded on one side by Lake Coleridge, and on the other partly by the Rakaia Forks Road, which is a first-class road. There is some very good land on the river side of this run that would grow good hay and turnips. Judging from its situation and configuration, this, I think, with a little cultivation, may be considered a very safe run in almost any winter. It could easily be subdivided. I should say it would carry about 5,000 sheep. 2,500 sheep on this land in this locality would give a comfortable living for any reasonable family. I would recommend it being subdivided into two runs.

Run No. 179, known as Acheron: 18,000 Acres, of which 13,000 Acres are barren.

This is high, rough, mountainous hill-tops, with a few acres of flats on the Harper River. It is entirely cut off by the Education reserve, and it is impossible to deal with it except in conjunction with the Education reserve.

Run No. 233; Glynnwy Station: 192,000 Acres.

This is quite a different class of country from any that we have hitherto inspected. We inspected all the country on the Hope River, including what is known as Jacob's country, to the boundaries at the head of the Hope waters. We also went up the Waiau River to the Steyning,

and up the Magdalene Valley to the Lewis, Doubtful, and Boyle Rivers. All the country on the south side of the Hope River is fairly free from bush till near the top, and the tussock on this country is of good quality, well mixed with English grasses. Some of the facings where the bush has been burnt off here have not taken the English grasses well; other patches have taken the surface-sown grasses very well. In this country the north facings lie well to the sun, and should be fairly safe winter country. The country up the River Waiau has nearly all been burnt bush, surface-sown, and the cocksfoot and clovers seem in most places to have done very well. This is also safe country. Along the Magdalene Valley, although very picturesque, yet the country about here and along to the Boyle River could not be considered winter country. Farther down the Boyle to the junction of the Hope River, the country, where there is no bush, is nice, warm, good lambing country. A large part of this run we did not inspect, as our limit of time would not allow. We were informed, however—I think on reliable authority—that we had inspected all the country on this run that, from a grazing point of view, was worth inspecting. I should think from what we saw and learned that there cannot be much more than 45,000 acres of grass-land—probably not that—on this run. The rest is covered with birch, mostly of inferior quality, with the exception of a few patches of very good red-birch. Most of the grass country back from the point I have already mentioned is high hill country, covered with carpet grass. This country, from its altitude, can only be made use of for a few months in the autumn—that is, the high hill-tops. There are small patches of good grasses in the valleys that can only be utilized by cattle; but any cattle put to graze on this country must be quiet cattle, brought on to the ground, and not left too long in one place. To breed cattle in this country would be simply to let them go wild, and it would be impossible to get them off the country. Can this run be subdivided? It could, and from the ruins of more than one old homestead it must in the past have actually been worked in two or three different runs. Can it be profitably subdivided now? That is another question, and I am very doubtful about it. The present lessee has made freehold every acre of the Hope Valley that is any good, and a good deal that is not much good, and that would be used as new homestead-sites. The rivers up here are rough and rapid, and make it very awkward—in fact, almost impossible—to work without bridges. There is one private bridge belonging to the present lessee that I understand cost £1,200 to erect; he has also other bridges. The improvements on this run in the shape of rabbit-proof fences, tracks, bridges, and the necessary acquiring of the freehold—or, at any rate, part of it—for homestead-sites, would make it almost impossible for the ordinary sheep-farmer to venture on the run. Besides, for a good few miles from the homestead there is no road, all the wool having to be packed out and the station requirements packed in. And, after all, although it is beautiful sweet country, yet it is subject to heavy snowfalls, and occasionally there is heavy mortality amongst the sheep. I understand the present lessee takes all his young stock down country in the winter. Further, the rabbit-proof fence running through this very rough country costs a good deal to maintain, and it is not only a benefit to the lessee, but also a benefit to a great part of Canterbury. It is necessary, therefore, to have lessees who will be most vigilant in looking after the fence and the rabbits. No man could be more vigilant than the present lessee. After carefully weighing the good and bad points of this run from every side, I am forced, though very reluctantly, to recommend it to be leased again as one run for fourteen years. I did not inspect it sufficiently to be able to state a fair rent for the future, but certainly I think it is worth more than the present rental.

This is the last run we inspected.

WINTER FEED.

In my opinion the growing of turnips for winter feed will yet be the most important factor in saving the sheep during heavy snowfalls. I do not mean the turnips to be grown and eaten off the ground in the usual way, but that they be grown and stored in heaps, and securely covered with earth before the winter begins. Then, when the snowstorm comes, they are easily sledged out on the tracks made by the snow-ploughs; and if the sheep are given these, with a little hay, there will practically be no danger of the usual mortality that takes place when feeding on dry hay alone. If no snow comes, the fresh, sound, frostless turnips will well repay for spring feed the trouble of carefully storing them away from the winter frosts. (As every one knows, when turnips get thoroughly frosted through there is not nearly the same nutriment in them.)

CONCLUDING REMARKS.

In conclusion, I might mention that, although the subdivisions on the country we have inspected do not seem many for the large area of country concerned, yet it must be pointed out that in most cases the runs are the worst of all the Canterbury runs. The Crown lands that we have passed along the frontage of the agricultural lands, such as Orari Gorge, Mount Peel, Mount Possession, and many others of the same class, will cut up in considerably smaller blocks, and with more safety than those we have dealt with.

Further, I think it is a great pity that the great tracts of good Education reserves scattered all over Canterbury could not be also utilized in this way, in conjunction with the Crown lands. If this were done it would very materially increase the population of Canterbury.

I have, &c.,

The Hon. the Minister of Lands, Wellington.

ROBERT GUTHRIE.

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