

No. 15.

Mr. R. W. WOOD, R.M., Wanganui, to the UNDER SECRETARY, Native Department.

SIR,—

Native Office, Wanganui, 28th May, 1878.

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your circular letter of the 25th April last, requesting me, by direction of the Hon. the Native Minister, to furnish an annual report upon the state of the Natives in my district. In conformity therewith, I beg to make the following report :—

First, as to the state of Native feeling. No great change has come about during the past year, although it is liable to fluctuate. One notable event has been the erection of a large runanga-house, or council-room, at Putiki Pa, opposite the town of Wanganui, on the Native reserve, now a property of immense value to the Natives, and where, in course of time, a town will spring up.

This quasi parliament house was erected by Mete Kingi, Haimona, and other chiefs, as a building wherein the Wanganui tribes might meet periodically for the discussion of all matters affecting the Natives. The building is unique in construction, being a composite of European and Maori material and mode of workmanship, and has a most pleasing effect. It cost something considerable in both labour and money; and, from the number of carvings and ornamental work, both within and without, has become quite an object of attraction, and is well worth a visit by strangers. On the 13th August last the building was opened, and a number of European ladies and gentlemen attended by invitation from Mete Kingi, and partook of a most substantial luncheon, served up in true English style, with Maori young ladies, dressed in the height of fashion, as waiters, under the supervision of Victoria Kemp. Upon the following day the house was formally opened, and the discussion of a number of subjects affecting both races commenced, and lasted for about one week. A second meeting was also held in April last, prior to the sitting of Parliament in July next, so as to afford time for petitioning the Assembly at its then sitting for redress of grievances, and amendment of laws applicable to the Maoris. As usual, land was the principal topic of conversation and debate.

At the first meeting in August, an effort was made to “tapu” several large tracts of country, and to forbid their being surveyed for lease or sale. The majority of the meeting agreed to this policy, being a last effort in opposition to the selling proclivities of an influential number of Natives. A short time has proved that such a determination could not be carried out, as, owing to the persistent acts of the land-sellers and others, Mete Kingi, Kemp, and other leading chiefs, who were asked to hold the interdicted land for the tribes, publicly, at last meeting, gave up their charge of same, and announced to the assembled Natives that for the future the Native landowners must use their own discretion, and hold or sell as they thought proper; that they were free to exercise their own right in the matter. The result has been an openly-manifested desire on the part of the Natives here to deal with their land, and numerous fresh surveys of blocks are being undertaken in all directions.

At the last meeting at Te Paku-o-te-rangi (Mete’s meeting-house), three main topics were discussed—1. A more complete representation, and a status in Parliament. 2. A share in the administration of their land, to include the investigation into title thereof by a Maori committee in connection with the Native Land Court, and by authority of law. 3. An amendment in the form of Crown grant for Native reserves, whereby same could be secured to their lineal descendants by entail general. Major Kemp and Mete Kingi were appointed delegates to bring these matters under the notice of the Assembly, by Bill or petition, as may be advised by the Hon. the Native Minister.

This question, the administration of their lands, is one of momentous import to the Wanganui tribes, seeing they are the owners of vast tracts of territory, which are daily increasing in value, whilst the original owners thereof are fast passing away.

During the next few years the Natives will be quite absorbed in the business of dealing with their surplus lands, and their minds will be quite unhinged, and I am afraid demoralized, thereby. Unfortunately, they are a most improvident race, their principles being, “Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.” One or two large blocks of land have been sold here lately to Native land agents, at an increased price from that offered by the Government; and the effect will be a disinclination in future on the part of the Natives to deal in any other mode with their lands, unless it can be shown to them that their interests will be better conserved by vesting the administration thereof in a Board, in which they will have a voice. This is a matter requiring the immediate attention of the Legislature, for, unless the law is soon altered, vast tracts of land will pass into the hands of European capitalists and monopolists, whereby the settlement of the country will be in a manner retarded. Millions of acres will in a few years be for disposal by one race to the other, and the mode of dealing adopted will be one of vital consequence to the well-being of both races. It is to be hoped that the public interests will not be allowed to suffer, but that justice will be done to both races through the wise laws of the country, and that ere long the vast interior will teem with an industrious European, and perhaps Maori, population.

As a consequence of this increased traffic in Maori lands, many disputes will arise amongst the claimants thereto; and there will be an increased danger of the peace being disturbed, and some fighting taking place amongst the Natives themselves. This risk, however, is much lessened as time rolls on, the Natives every day becoming more amenable to law, and less liable