

## OTAGO.

SIR,—

In pursuance of Order in Council, of date 17th December, 1878, and in accordance with Circular No. 45, dated Wellington, 19th December, 1879, I have the honor to forward Report of the School Commissioners of the Provincial District of Otago, for the year ended 31st December, 1879.

At the commencement of the year the Commissioners appointed a Factor to take the management of the reserves, and act as Secretary to the Board; they also procured offices in which to transact their business. During the year they held nine regular and one special meeting, at which in addition to the usual routine business they adjusted claims from the Boards of Governors of the Otago, Southland, and Waitaki High Schools, for rents collected by the Commissioners from secondary reserves belonging to those bodies prior to their taking the management thereof themselves. The Commissioners have now only the management of the primary and those secondary reserves unallocated to any particular body.

During the year the Commissioners have, in addition to the above settlements, paid over the following sums, namely:—From primary reserves, Otago Education Board, £9,602 19s. 2d.; Southland, £2,475 11s. From secondary reserves, Otago High School, £1,644 12s. 5d.; Southland High School, £423 18s. 4d.

During the year they have leased eleven town, thirty-one suburban, and seventeen country sections in various parts of the provincial district, at an annual rental of £962 19s. 10d.

In March, 1879, they surveyed Run 88, Wyndham, into fourteen farms, of from 191 to 809 acres, with a view to leasing them. They regret to say, however, that only one section has been taken up, notwithstanding the fact that they were submitted for lease by auction on two occasions after being well advertised. The Commissioners intend to lease the whole of the run in one lot for pastoral purposes on short lease.

The Commissioners beg to call your attention to the following facts in explanation of the large amount shown in the annexed balance sheet as arrears outstanding on 31st December, 1879:—

When they entered on the administration of the reserves, they found that in a number of cases (principally in connection with township sections) the tenants were some years in arrear, they have since succeeded in collecting part of those arrears, but in not a few cases the lessees have either become insolvent or have abandoned the land, leaving no recourse for recovery of rent. In these cases the rent has continued to be debited to the tenants year by year, thus increasing to a considerable extent the total amount shown as in arrears.

The Commissioners calculate that of the sum of £2,278 17s. 5d. shown in the balance-sheet as in arrear, £445 5s. is thus absolutely irrecoverable, and they are now taking active steps to deal with the land in question anew. The latter amount will be written off their books at the close of the present year.

Another reason for the large sum outstanding has been the extreme difficulty experienced in collecting the current rents during the year; this was caused by the depressed state of the produce market, and the consequent scarcity of money among the small farmers, to which class the majority of the tenants belong.

A considerable number of the rents fell due towards the end of the year, and have been paid since then, namely—the sum of £345 15s. 10d., which amount, added to the £445 5s. before mentioned, reduces the outstanding arrears to £1,487 16s. 7d.

The Commissioners are now taking summary steps for the recovery of arrears, and the prompt payment of current rents, and they anticipate putting matters on a more satisfactory footing before the end of the present year.

Annexed hereto is the balance-sheet, duly audited, showing the receipts and expenditure of the Commissioners during the year, and also copy of the Commissioners' Bye-laws.

The School Commissioners beg to draw your attention to the difficulty experienced in leasing large blocks of land, and they would impress on the Government the advisability of introducing a Bill during the next session of Parliament empowering them to sell reserves from time to time as may be considered expedient, the income arising from the investment of the proceeds thereof to be devoted to the purposes for which the reserves were originally made. At the present time the Commissioners have Run 88 still unlet, and during the next two years the leases of several reserve runs will fall in, and they believe that though great difficulty might be experienced in leasing those lands, they would bring good prices if cut up and sold.

The following resolution has been passed by the Commissioners on the subject:—“That the Commissioners are of opinion that Run 88, as well as other reserves, should, from time to time be offered for sale, and that the Chairman request the Government to bring in a Bill during next session of Parliament to effect this object; also that provision be made in the Bill for the vesting of the proceeds of any lands so sold in the School Commissioners for the purposes for which the reserves were originally set aside.”

The Commissioners are also of opinion that a reasonable fee should be paid to members for their attendance at the monthly meetings of the Board of School Commissioners. Most of the members are business men, and their time is valuable. The meetings take up from two to three hours or the best part of a day, and they consider that some compensation should be made for the time so spent. No provision has been made in the “Education Reserves Act, 1877,” for any such payment, and the Commissioners would (in the event of a Bill being introduced dealing with education reserves) be glad if a clause could be inserted giving the necessary authority.

The following resolution in connection with the matter was passed by the Board of Commissioners:—“That in the opinion of the Commissioners, provision should be made in the same Bill (Bill empowering Commissioners to sell reserves) for payment for their services, and that a copy of this resolution be forwarded to the Minister of Education.”

The Hon. the Minister for Education.  
Dunedin, 28th April 1880.

J. P. MAITLAND, Chairman.