

APPENDIX B.

STATEMENT before the COMMITTEE by Rev. H. A. ROBERTSON.—21st March, 1883.

REV. H. A. ROBERTSON, questioned by the Committee.—Has been in England only a few days, having just come from Erromango, on which island he has been living as a missionary since 1872. Previous to this, and before he became a missionary, lived on Aneitum from 1864 to 1868, and has personal knowledge of other islands.

When he was first in the New Hebrides there was scarcely any labour trade, only a few occasional cutters to New Caledonia. When he returned in 1872 he found the traffic in full activity.

Considers the trade on the whole a great evil; but does not consider it an unmitigated evil, inasmuch as he knows of individuals who have been benefited by their three years' service; but the general effect is undoubtedly evil.

His reasons for considering the labour trade an evil:—

1. The great mortality amongst the absent labourers. Has heard that the death-rate has been as high as 80 per cent. in Queensland. He himself, with his teachers, in 1878 made a list of 600 names of natives who had been recruited from Erromango in the previous ten years. Of this 600, only 200 ever came back.
2. This mortality, and the drain from the island of the young men, is rapidly depopulating the island. Population at last census, in 1879, was 2,640. Is, apart from the labour trade, decreasing slowly owing to change of habits, such as wearing clothes, consequent on introduction of Christianity and civilization. But this cause of decrease only temporary. General death-rate in the island not high, at most 10 per cent. In one town, only three, of all ages, out of seventy, died in three years.
3. The labour trade unhinges society, owing to the young and able men being carried away.
4. Introduction of firearms and poisons. On Tanna there were cases in which returned labourers poisoned the food of their enemies.
5. Introduction of syphilis and other diseases.

Reasons for not considering the labour trade an unmitigated evil:—

1. Has known cases of Christian natives who have been recruited, and have returned not unchristianized, more civilized, and with larger ideas of labour, payment, &c. These have had a good influence on their surroundings. These, however, form but a small proportion of returned labourers, whose general characteristic is drunkenness and profanity. They usually come back more reckless and savage than when they went away.

Questioned as to Method of Recruiting.

Has seen much of it from personal observation. Considers that whether it is properly or improperly carried on depends on whether the captain, mate, or labour agent on a vessel has a personal interest, such as a commission per head on the number recruited.

The recruiting is always virtually a matter of purchase. Has seen men paid for by "presents" of muskets to chiefs or friends; these being accepted, the men are, according to native etiquette, under a moral obligation to enlist as desired.

Even without purchase a certain number would voluntarily enlist at Erromango, partly from a desire to see the world, and partly to acquire property, the latter idea being fallacious, as they come back to be the poorest people on the island; whatever they bring back they at once give away to their friends; they have no property left in the island, and find, perhaps, even their wives married to others.

Much discontent caused by natives voluntarily recruiting without the consent of chief or relatives. Quoted case of a father who was shot at Api at the bows of a boat from which he was trying to induce his son, who had just enlisted, to return.

Recruits are always taught on board to say that they have enlisted voluntarily, whether it is the case or not, and that they have nothing to complain of.

As to Returned Labour.

They are generally satisfied with their payment; but usually bring back rubbish, as, though they are as a rule paid in coin, they are recommended by their masters to spend it at stores in which the planters have an interest.

Has known many cases in which they have been landed at the wrong places in Erromango. Has known of many cases in which this has happened in Tanna and Api, &c., with the result that the returned labour have been clubbed.

The pay of a dead labourer, which should be returned to his relatives in money, is not sent unless his death takes place at the end of his three years.

As to Recruiting of Women.

Has strongest objection to it in all cases, on account of the immorality to which they are exposed. Would not exempt cases in which women could go away with husbands or relatives.

Few women have been recruited from Erromango. Of these, some have eloped, some have gone with husband, some have been young girls bought, according to a very strong impression, for immoral purposes. With eyes fully open to consequence of single men going away for three years, he would absolutely prohibit emigration of women in all cases whatever. Voluntary enlistment of women without consent of relatives would be a certain cause of outrages.

As an instance of a mode of recruiting, Mr. Robertson stated to the Committee the case of the murder of two natives of Erromango, and the abduction of a girl and boy, in September, 1882, by boat-crews of the brigantine "Ceara." On the 5th of September, 1882, the three-masted schooner "Ceara," of Queensland, carrying the English flag, and commanded by Captain Satine, a Swede,