

On the supposition that it would be sold during the construction of the railway, Mr. Wrigg in 1868 valued the 152,000 acres of flat land he found between Nelson and Cobden at £3 10s. an acre—equal to £380,000. The Westland Railway League in 1879 valued 65,000 acres of bush land within two miles of the East and West Coast line at £5 an acre; and 100,000 acres more within five miles at £3 an acre—£625,000 for 165,000 acres. This is the estimated value after the railway is made. Mr. Mueller, Chief Surveyor and Commissioner of Crown Lands for Westland, in his evidence before the Railway Commission of 1880, endorsed these figures both as regards quantity and value.

Looking at it, as he expressly said, solely from an agricultural and pastoral point of view, Mr. Calcutt valued the settlement land between Nelson and Greymouth in the hands of the Crown—202,340 acres—at £137,340; and he estimated that the value would be increased to about £290,000 by the construction of the railway.

Mr. Thomas Mackay, in his evidence before the Railway Commission of 1880, said that Mr. Calcutt had under-estimated the increase due to the making of the railway, and that 50,000 acres of forest land in the Buller watershed would alone be worth £500,000 when the railway is made.

This indicates the correct way of estimating these forest lands: their real value is the price of the natural crop of timber that is on them, added to their capacity for producing artificial crops when the timber is removed. What these amount to is a difficult question to answer, so much depends on the market that is opened up for the timber and the facilities that are provided for bringing it to that market, as well as on the subsequent outlet for agricultural produce.

Capabilities.—It is admitted on all sides that the climate of the West Coast is not suited for the growth of grain. With the exception of a small plot in the Buller Valley, I am not aware of wheat having ever been grown even as an experiment, and I question if it will ever be grown in quantity till the climate is completely changed by the denudation of the forest lands. It does not, of course, follow herefrom that the country is altogether unfit for settlement. Some of the finest districts in New Zealand, where the land is richest, are unsuited for growing wheat. As for grass and root crops, I see no reason why they should not grow as well on the West as on the East Coast.

The rapid growth of rushes on cultivated land, which is frequently mentioned as a serious evil, does not seem much worse than in many other districts throughout the colony where the drainage is defective. I saw very little of it south of Ross, where the soil is porous. The rapid vegetation of this and all other kind on the West Coast is not due so much to the excessive rainfall and the number of rainy days as to the mildness of climate and the long retention of the moisture by the all-prevailing forest. The mildness of the West Coast climate is evinced by the luxuriance of the semi-tropical vegetation, and the altitude to which it rises. In the eastern watershed nothing but the hardiest beech is seen at high levels; but the range is no sooner crossed than pines and other delicate plants are met with. Young rimu and kahikatea grow quite freely in the open on the West Coast, a thing unheard of in the south-eastern provinces of the Middle Island. The North Island rata is quite common at Westport, and nikau palms grow on the exposed seashore as far south as Barrytown.

With reference to the rainfall on the West Coast as compared with other bush districts throughout the colony, unfortunately the records are not sufficiently numerous to enable a correct comparison to be made; but Hokitika is believed to be no wetter than some parts of the country round the base of Mount Egmont, and Westport is very much on a par with Woodville.

Classification.—In the previous tables no account is taken of the quality of the land; and, in consequence of the density of the bush, the frequent changes in the character of the country, and the absence of cultivation, anything like a correct classification is impossible. I, however, submit the following rough approximation as regards the arable lands on the West Coast:—

						Acres.
Quality No. 1	...	...	...	...	...	100,000
Quality No. 2	...	...	...	...	...	350,000
Quality No. 3	...	...	...	...	...	300,000
Quality No. 4	...	...	...	...	...	294,600
Total	...	...	...	...	...	1,044,600

No. 1 represents the alluvial lands south of Ross, and other river-flats of smaller area, such as the Four-River Plain, on the Buller.

No. 2 includes the ordinary low-lying forest country and the better kind of hilly lands.

No. 3 is ordinary hilly country and terraces, and other lands of similar character.

No. 4 represents the poorer class of pakihis and the rougher hilly lands.

As my report of 1879 dealt mainly with the railway between the two coasts and northward from Christchurch, the through communication from Hokitika to Nelson was not considered; consequently no notice was taken of the lands south of Hokitika. It is, however, quite fair to notice them now in connection with the present proposals, for they undoubtedly affect and are affected by any extensive system of railways terminating at Hokitika. How far south this effect operates is a moot question, to which I have already referred.

The alluvial lands south of Ross are undoubtedly good, and decidedly the best on the West Coast. They begin at the Waitaha, and continue in a narrow strip with more or less intermission right down to the Otago boundary. The land is schist alluvium, like Inch Clutha, or the Taieri Plain. The best portions are covered, not with heavy timber, but with flax and light scrub-ribbon-wood—koromiko, and other shrubs indicative of good land. And not only is the land good, but it is easily cleared. The only drawback is its comparatively small extent and remoteness from the railway. I came across a few small patches of the same quality of schist land at the Poerua Lake, Upper Grey Valley, and several other places north of Hokitika. The character of the soil was readily noticeable by the luxuriance of the vegetation and its peculiar character.