

Gerald and Mr. Gavin sought to impose upon me the work of piling up ledgers and journals and cash-books, numbered vouchers, and triplicate receipts without end. Mr. Gavin talked of imprests, imprestees, imprest advance accounts, and imprest ledgers for the few small advances out of my cash; advances that would have been lost sight of in the maze, as I believe that moneys in these imprest accounts have sometimes been lost sight of in the past. How should I have ever been able to find those five little advance fish in the enormous imprest pond which he would have constructed for them? And as the fish were not to be kept long, the pond only might soon have been left as the cumbrous monument of our genius.

Then came objections to payment in cash instead of by cheque; and further objections to the absence of the unwieldy books which the Audit appears, from habit rather than on any reasonable grounds, to regard as necessary to a perfect system of book-keeping. Absence of all considerations of profit and loss in matters of accounts and of audit, as well as of precautions against fraud, would imply that, in the eyes of the Audit, book-keeping is the object to be attained, not a means of safety to business. As to cheques, and the objection to cash payments, somebody must pay the cash for which a cheque may be drawn, so that, however respectable the drawer might be, every cheque must, according to the Audit, have an objectionable destination. The use of cheques is, as every one's experience proves, more dangerous for the great majority of payments than the use of cash. But the risk would not be worth mentioning, if the result were the profit and convenience of the public. It is absurd, and often trying to the public, that no person should have the right to receive, except by a cheque, money due from a public office, in the manner in which money is received and paid by a shopkeeper. If State banking were to be adopted in New Zealand, Mr. FitzGerald would have two banks, so that one might draw cheques on the other, and keep in a commercial bank whatever money they might possess.

Then the Audit affected to entertain some doubt whether the Post Office could with safety much further extend the service which it was affording to other departments. I remarked that it was difficult to offer more than the result of experience by way of removing such a fear. Soon after the introduction, almost a generation ago, of the Post Office Account, of which the principle was comprehensive enough for the business of receiving and paying money for every department of the public service—and the Post Office accordingly undertook the collection of the revenue from various sources, including the property-tax, to the great convenience of the public, and at a saving of thousands a year—fears, like this Audit fear, in which Mr. Gavin had concurred, were expressed that the Post Office would be overtaxed. We, who know what the business of the Post Office now is, are amused at those fears. It may well be, when our little colony has grown older, when its population and the business of its Post Office have enormously increased, that those who come after us may read of the fear of Mr. Gavin, and be amused in their turn. If any disaster should befall the Post Office, it will be due, not to any defect in the system of the Post Office Account, not to the calls upon the Post Office to render the services of which it is capable, but to really fatal mistakes, to want of judgment in the choice of officials for its administration, to neglect to preserve and increase its efficiency, to distrust and jealousy, and to such fear and hesitation as are affected by our Audit officials.

A docket in the till of the cashier keeps an advance daily before the accountant, proves the accuracy of the advance, and, to the consternation of the Audit, indicates an escape from the tyranny of its books. The Audit should endeavour to teach that accounts and book-keeping involve nothing but, pecuniarily expressed, the receipt and payment of money, and that the processes are best by which the record is efficiently kept with the least labour and expense. If some of the Post Office accountants were to seriously apprehend an introduction of the unwieldy system of imprest accounts and books for the enormous volume of the Post Office advances by Chief Postmasters, so accurately and efficiently arranged during the last twenty years, and accounted for as included in the balances of money due from Chief Postmasters, they would receive the announcement with death in their faces.

The Audit Department, under Mr. FitzGerald, appears to ignore the truth that the audit of business of any kind is really a matter of profit and loss. No audit can be defended of which the benefit may not be worth the expense; no check should cost more than it is expected to save; no commercial man, however philanthropic, would, in his senses, ever dream of setting up, at an expense of £200, a check on pilfering by which he might lose £50; and no person who has studied the subject of accounts, the receipt and payment of money, and the audit of the transactions, would ever propose to set up a system which would entirely prevent fraud. If such a system were possible, its cost would be sure to preclude its adoption. The more the question is studied, the more surprising it is that men of intelligence like Mr. FitzGerald should be writing about numbered and unnumbered forms, and making laws and regulations that the public must observe all sorts of small irritating precautions in the receipt and payment of money due to or coming from a public office. A person having money to pay to this office will, and always would, as a general rule, hand it to any one in the office, or employed by the office, ready to take it, and, speaking from a large experience of my own, would care very little, in nine cases out of ten, what sort of receipt he obtained. The numbering of forms is calculated rather to impose on weak minds than to receive the approval of accountants, who combine with a knowledge of the theory of their business some experience of the trying carelessness of the public.

From the blighting effects of the Audit despotism the Post Office has escaped, and a Post Office Account has become possible and been introduced, which, distinguished by the absence of all superfluous book-keeping, extorts universal admiration. Recovering from the same blighting effects, the Public Trust Office is in a state of convalescence, when Mr. FitzGerald sounds a dire alarm that this, his dearest principle, is at stake. But it is too late now. The Post Office cannot turn back to old impracticable methods, under old Audit dictation. What would the Property-Tax Department do; what the Education Department; what the Stock and other Departments? Why,