

SESS. II.—1897.  
NEW ZEALAND.

# PUBLIC TRUST OFFICE

(REPORT RELATING TO THE).

*Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.*

The PUBLIC TRUSTEE to the Hon. the COLONIAL TREASURER.

SIR,—

Public Trust Office, Wellington, 17th July, 1897.

In compliance with your request I have the honour to report upon the Public Trust Office

I took charge in the middle of September last year, and have therefore had time to master the details of the office business and the system upon which it works.

Speaking generally, I find that the staff both at the head office and at the various agencies is zealous, trustworthy, and most anxious to promote the good of the service and to study the best interests of the office and its clients, and I am glad to bear witness to the satisfactory way in which the members of the staff endeavour to carry out their duties. The salaries are not, perhaps, in some instances adequate, but are probably as much as the office can at present afford to pay. Promotion is of necessity slow, owing to the fact that vacancies do not often occur, and consequently an officer is kept in an inferior position and at a low salary when he is quite capable of taking a higher position with an increased salary.

The business of the office is divided into classes, *e.g.*, wills, lunacies, intestates, Native affairs, &c., and a clerk is placed in charge of each class, with such subordinates as may be necessary, and is responsible for the business connected with his branch, and every effort is made to so educate the members of the staff that they will be competent to take more responsible positions as vacancies occur.

The system of book-keeping is so simple that any lad of ordinary intelligence and education should have no difficulty in picking it up. It is eminently suited for the peculiar business of this office, and it enables each branch to act as its own ledger-keeper, thus saving the expense of a staff of book-keepers pure and simple.

The building in which the head office is situated at Wellington is most inconvenient. When I took charge I found the officers spread in rooms separated from each other, some on one floor and some on another. So far as is possible they are now concentrated, although overcrowded, but the public office is still on a different floor to mine, that of the correspondence clerks, and the solicitor to the office. The result is that it is difficult to maintain that supervision over the office that is desirable, and it is impossible to economise the time and labour of the staff. Further than this, there is no opportunity for the clerks having charge of the different branches to see people privately; and the consequence is that, no matter what the person's business is, whether in connection with their dead relatives' estates or with an estate being administered under the Convicts Forfeiture Act, or under the Lunatics Act, that business must be discussed and done at a public counter in the presence of any persons who may be waiting in the office.

The rent I am paying is £475. With interest at its present low rate it would pay the office to either build or acquire a building of its own. As the law stands at present the office funds could not be invested in the purchase of land, and, in order to build, either Parliament must provide the money or grant its sanction to the Public Trustee investing from the office funds the necessary sum. I have made inquiries, and believe that a sum of £11,000 would be ample to acquire and furnish an office suitable in every way to the business.

One drawback under which the office labours is the necessity for centralisation at Wellington of the administration of the estates which are in the office. It certainly does seem absurd that a small intestate estate of a person dying at, say Invercargill, or Auckland, must of necessity be administered from Wellington. This is, however, unavoidable. The discretions and powers vested in the Public Trustee are personal to himself, and he alone, therefore, can exercise them, and to decentralise the business of the office would necessitate an alteration by Act of the whole basis upon which the office exists. It would be quite possible to devise a workable scheme by which the colony should be divided into districts, each of such districts being placed under the administration of an officer who should, with regard to estates within his district, have all the powers and authorities which are now vested in the Public Trustee, leaving the control of the Trust Office funds to be dealt with by the Public Trustee himself as at present. If this or any such scheme were carried into effect it would be necessary to remove the responsibility of administering estates from the Public Trustee and placing it upon district agents. The Public Trustee's duties then would be confined to dealing with the general finances of the office, and exercising a supervision over the district agents similar to that exercised by the chief officers of a bank over the bank's branches.