

KAEO, 11TH FEBRUARY, 1893.

*James Halliday* : I have been a settler and storekeeper at Kaeo for the last fourteen years. I have been connected with the gum industry up to the last two years, and still do a little gum-buying. The quantity of gum produced in this district has fallen off slightly, although the men are working in swamps this year that have not been touched before owing to the dryness of the season. The quality is quite as good, although it is not got in the same quantity. I do not touch black gum or any of the poor grades now. The average digger makes 15s. clear of tucker. The tucker bill comes to 12s. I have not bought from Austrians, but there are a few Austrians here. The diggers complain of the Austrians : firstly, because they work the fields too closely ; secondly, they put such a quantity of gum in the market that the price is kept down ; and thirdly, they send the money so earned out of the country. The Austrians are very industrious and honest and law-abiding. If the Government could offer a piece of land so as to induce them to stop, the objection to them would disappear. I have had a good many dealings with Austrians in store matters, and have not found them mean. If a storekeeper is in a position to hold his gum for a favourable opportunity he could get from £5 to £6 more than if he sold to the merchants in Auckland, who form rings and rig the market. About five years ago, before the last Gum Commission went round, the buyers on the fields were purchasing at high prices, anticipating a rise ; but prices fell, first £10 and then £7 a ton, consequently some of the storekeepers were ruined, and others most severely hit. I do not think the Austrians are the greatest evil, but the "ring" in Auckland is.

*Joseph Hare, jun.* : I am a partner in Hare Brothers, of Kaeo, storekeepers and gum-buyers. I am well acquainted with the industry for the last twenty years. I should say there are fifty diggers, of whom not more than two or three are Austrians. We have had no dealings with Austrians yet. In summer time the preponderance of gum produced is that known as "black jack." The supply of gum has been steady until this last year, when it has fallen off. The average digger can make £1 a week besides his tucker. There are some here who can make £3 a week ; others cannot make 10s. The cost of living for a digger is not more than 10s. a week, including meat. The Austrian question is never mentioned here. There are no leased fields here. It is a free field ; diggers buy and sell where they like. I buy less gum than I used to ; but there are three stores here now, and probably the total amount equals my dealings before. We have gone into the timber business now. There is a discrepancy in the weights of gum as weighed by us and that given in Auckland, but I do not think it is an unfair discrepancy. It is partly owing to dust escaping and the gum drying. A hundredweight of gum in summer time in a week would lose 2 lb. in weight ; but in winter the same parcel would not lose anything, on account of the moisture of the atmosphere. I have even known gum to be affected going down in a boat, by being wet with rain, the gum absorbing the moisture. Of course, this difference would be greater if the gum was packed in sacks. It would be of great benefit if prices could be fixed, say, for six months, so that the sudden falls and rises in the market could be done away with. My prices of stores are as follows : Flour, 14s. to 15s. per hundredweight ; sugar (No. 2), £1 5s. per hundredweight ; candles, from 6½d. to 10d. (same brand) ; tea, 2s. per pound. We give a discount of 2½ per cent. on groceries and 5 per cent. on draperies for cash. Fresh meat, 3½d. and 4d. per pound. Goods can be bought here for almost Queen Street prices, owing to competition. The present condition of things does not conduce to settlement at all. We do not find the digger a settler. He is as free as the air he breathes ; he is simply a rover. Settlers here have made digging a wonderful help to settlement. Five years ago I induced a man to take up a piece of land ; he was digging gum at that time ; and now he is doing very well, and if at any time he wants money he digs a bit of gum. The aid given to settlement by being able to procure gum is the best in the world. From my personal observation, gum will be found for the next twenty years. Gum will be procured from bushes that are being worked at the present time. It will take about five years to make them workable, until the fire has swept them clean, and burned the stumps, roots, &c.

*William Hearn* : I have been a storekeeper and gum buyer at Te Whau for thirteen or fourteen years. I travel about buying gum on the fields, and I cart it home to my store. I take steelyards with me. The production of gum is falling off. In this dry weather all the gum is black and swamp gum. In my opinion, it proves that the Home market must be supplied with gum at any cost, and is satisfied with any quality. There has never been a year in my experience where black gum has been in such demand. I think we have had very fair prices indeed from the Auckland buyers. I think if some means could be devised by which the markets at Home could be steadied, so that we knew for several months in advance what price to buy at, it would be of benefit to both digger and buyer. So far we have not been troubled with the Austrians. It would be very prejudicial if they came to us. I do not buy any gum from the northern fields. The majority of the diggers round about me, although a steady decent class of diggers, are not, I am afraid, of the material of which settlers are made. I do not think the fields will be done in twenty years, at the present rate of production and the present places they are getting gum. It is almost impossible to dig white gum, as the ground is so hard. I have no suggestions to make as to how improvements could be made by Government or any one in which the trade could be benefited. If the digger would settle, that would be a good thing ; but I do not think one-third would take advantage if land were offered. We are suffering from the want of settlement here. If the Omaunu Block, in this vicinity, was cut up for settlement it would be immediately taken up by men who would ultimately make it a success, as the land is pretty good, and it is adjacent to gumfields.

*George Samuel Leever* : I am a settler in this district of thirty years. I am a freeholder, and a bushman. I know generally the wants of the men who dig gum in this district, and I have been observant of their habits. If portions of Crown lands bearing gum were reserved for men over forty years of age for them to fall back on I think it would be a good thing. There is nothing between bushwork and charitable aid if the gum is gone, as the general run of the men cannot