

A BRIEF RETROSPECT OF NATIVE-SCHOOL WORK.

Just now, when Native village schools in their more fully developed form have completed their twentieth year of existence, the time would seem to be suitable for taking a backward glance along the road that has been traversed by them. Near the close of the report for 1880-81 the following passage occurs: "That the Maoris will ultimately become Europeanized and be absorbed into the general population does not admit of doubt. It is easy to see that the process has already commenced, and that it is going on with more or less rapidity in most parts of New Zealand. But it is a great mistake to suppose that the change can be effected in a year or two, or even in a generation—to suppose that schools or any other agency can bring about in a short time such a revolution as has in other countries required centuries to complete. The Native schools are doing and will do much good; it is useless to expect that they will, in a few years, change the character of a whole race to such an extent that its members will be prepared to abandon all their old habits, traditions, prejudices, and modes of living. Nor is it at all plain that such an utter change should be brought about hastily, even if the thing were possible. Past experience seems to show that uncivilised peoples cannot, without imminent risk of extermination, give up their old ways of life all at once, and adopt others, for which they can be really fitted only by slow and gradual changes in the conditions, subjective and objective, under which they exist. If it can be shown, as I believe it can, that the Native schools as a whole are effecting considerable improvements in the mental, moral, and physical condition of our Maori fellow-subjects, and that they are having the effect of familiarising them with the better class of European ideas and customs, then they are doing all that can or ought to be expected from them. There are a few exceptions, but in the great majority of the Maori districts those best qualified to judge say that this is just the kind of work that the schools are doing, and that they are the best means yet contrived for helping the Maoris to help themselves."

There was, of course, nothing very original in this passage even when it was written. What worth it possessed was to be found in the fact that it was a tolerably clear statement of the Native-school problem as it confronted us at the beginning of the "eighties." The really interesting circumstance for us is that twenty years afterwards, when we are fast approaching the end of the nineteenth century, the statement is just as true and complete as it was when it was written.

Are we then to understand that Native schools are just jogging along quietly and smoothly, very much as they did twenty years ago? That is by no means the position. Certainly, the direction and the goal remain unchanged, but there has been decided progress in that direction and towards that goal. A few brief paragraphs will give some idea of the nature of the actual progress made.

In the first place, it is necessary to state that the original Native schools were founded under the auspices of the Native Ministers and by the old Native Department. Eight years and more of work done by these schools, with much energy and earnest desire to benefit the Maori race, could hardly fail to produce solid results—sufficient, in fact, to form a basis for a more completely organized system. And, indeed, it did not fail: perhaps its attempts to meet wants as they arose, to supply needs as they were felt, did more in the way of making a good beginning than could have been achieved by any full-blown scheme based on, say, one of the education systems then in vogue in New Zealand. It should be remembered that the problem to be dealt with was almost entirely new: it was to bring an untutored but intelligent and high-spirited people into line with our civilisation, and to do this, to a large extent, by instructing them in the use of our language, and by placing in Maori settlements European school-buildings, and European families to serve as teachers and especially as exemplars of a new and more desirable mode of life. It would perhaps be difficult to say who was the first to set up this admirable ideal, remarkable alike for its thorough-going effectiveness and for its simplicity; but at all events it was fully operative when the Education Department took over the Native schools, and it had already been productive of much good to the Maori. As the greater portion of this article will, to some extent, appear to be a criticism of the old Native Department's methods, and a statement of the advances made by the Education Department, it is only right to acknowledge—(1) that the leading idea that governs Native-school work was already in full operation when we took the schools over; and (2) that, in face of the remarkable and previously unknown difficulties, the Native-school authorities had managed to make their Native schools a going concern, and to get much useful work done by them. To this it may be added that the Native schools were taken over by the Education Department just at the time when it was necessary that somewhat more technical knowledge than had been previously available should be brought to bear upon them.

One of the most striking of the changes that have taken place is in what may be called the externals of our schools—the sites in general, the gardens, schoolhouses, and residences. It must be confessed that there were a few pleasing school-sites and gardens connected with Native schools even in 1880, but these were quite exceptional. Now very many of the teachers' gardens and grounds are in first-class condition. In the old times, there is reason to believe, the authorities considered any building that would keep out most of the rain, and give more or less complete shelter from wind and sun, a tolerably satisfactory Native schoolhouse. In some districts, at all events, this mistake appears to have been largely influential. The effect was decidedly bad. In most cases the Maoris could see at a glance that their schools were far inferior to those put up for the European children. The Maoris do not like to be slighted, and they took umbrage at what they considered humiliating treatment. They were well aware that in the main they contributed to the revenue just as other people did, and, no doubt, thought that they ought to get the same kind of value for their money. In the early days, too, the residences of some of the teachers were altogether inadequate for their needs; there were cases—extreme ones—in which teachers with large families had no more living accommodation than was afforded by two small rooms attached to their