

GENERAL REPORT.

THIS report, dealing with the operations of the Board of Native Affairs during the financial year ended 31st March, 1937, provides a summary of the principal activities undertaken throughout the year in connection with the development, settlement, cultivation, and farming of Native lands, and is in continuation of previous statements presented to both Houses of the General Assembly during the past six years.

The results which have attended the agricultural schemes, which were initiated in 1930 for the settlement of the Maori people and the improvement of their lands with the aid of public funds, are distinctly encouraging, and the experience gained in the course of development will be of immense value in establishing further undertakings. The progress made in recent years in the solution of Native land problems, the vast changes that have taken place in Maoridom since primordial times, the effect of Western culture upon a people living in a Stone Age, are matters of more than passing interest, and a brief reference to the evolution of the first inhabitants of this country is perhaps not out of place in this report.

The life of the neolithic Maori centred around the canoe. Descended from a maritime race of hardy adventurous sea-rovers who ranged the southern ocean, his primitive craft, hewn from kauri or totara tree, was of vital importance both in times of peace and war, as a means of procuring food, for inter-communication and trade, for sport and recreation, and for hostile expeditions. Perfectly carved with inferior stone tools, decorated, painted, plumed, and inlaid, it was at the expense of labour, perseverance, and ingenuity a masterpiece of art and technical skill. Gradually the wanderlust subsided as each tribe sought out an empty territory for itself, and each district became the land of a clan, but, always needing fish, they built their villages near beach, river, or lake, and the canoe remained indispensable to their needs. With the advent of Western civilization, and the acceptance of European standards of living, the land to-day has taken the place of the canoe of by-gone years. The future of the Maori, his material existence, his economic, physical, and social welfare, is indubitably bound up in the soil from which alone the great majority of his people can win an independent livelihood. Specially adapted for rural life, naturally industrious, if at times spasmodic in his efforts, his tastes and inclinations are now centred in the remaining lands of his ancestors which must always represent his principal means of subsistence—in other words, his canoe.

A study of the early Native land laws, down to the last generation at least, reveals the fact that, however benevolent the intentions of the Legislature may have been towards the Maori race, the effect of numerous statutory enactments was mainly to encourage and facilitate European settlement and thus separate the original owners from their lands. Prior to 1905 there was no legislative regulation fixing the minimum price to be offered by the Crown for Native lands, there was no restriction on the prodigal expenditure of the proceeds of sales, and no provision for ascertaining whether the Native vendors retained sufficient lands for their occupation and maintenance. The danger existed that Natives could, if unchecked, divest themselves completely of their landed estates as the result of a system which had persisted for more than half a century. Undoubtedly public opinion has been awakened during the last two or three decades to the need for preserving the remaining Native lands for the wants of an increasing Maori population, and the vesting of large areas in statutory bodies, the incorporation of owners, and consolidation of interests have been important steps in this direction. Purchases by the Crown have now practically ceased and the interests of owners are to a great extent safeguarded by the Native Land Courts.

The policy to-day is to assist the Maori to develop and farm his lands, to train him in those branches of agriculture most suited to his needs, to profitably