

scarcity of gum and difficulty of getting it, or a considerable reduction in price, would, we should suppose, have its natural effect in checking an influx of these people; but, it must at the same time be remarked, that the Austrians, although subject to the effect of these causes, would probably be the last class of persons on the gumfields to be affected by them. The reasons for this are such as tell altogether in favour of the personal character and qualities of these men, although the result may be injurious to the gum-digging industry, unless it be denied that an excessive supply of labourers is an evil. The testimony that we have received satisfies us that as a class the Austrians are honest, industrious, sober, and frugal. They will live on a very little rather than get into debt; but there is also evidence that when they begin to make good wages they do not by any means stint themselves in their supplies of food. It follows from these qualities that they will, in case of necessity, work longer hours, live more economically, and be content with smaller wages than the average British digger.

Again, the question arises whether these men will stay in the colony and settle, or go back to their own country. The general opinion appears to be, and so far as we have been able to elicit their own views they corroborate this opinion—that they will return to their own country, taking with them any money they have made. But no sufficient inducement to settle has yet been held out to them; and we are much inclined to think that if suitable land were offered them, on which they could grow grapes, figs, olives, &c., and find a market for these products, a considerable number of them would probably be glad to settle; and if they were to do so they would certainly be a benefit to the country. It has been said that they will not learn English; but we have ascertained that, as a rule, a very fair proportion of them learn English quite well enough to make themselves understood, and that they are not very long in doing it.

We must here mention the rumour which a short time ago was widely spread, and currently believed throughout the gumfields, to the effect that these Austrians were being brought to the colony under express contract with certain lessees of gum-land, for the purpose of reducing the cost of labour. There is absolutely no foundation for such a belief; but the belief itself may be partly accounted for by the appearance of an advertisement in a Sydney newspaper inviting diggers to come to certain gumfields in New Zealand. This advertisement was shown by properly-directed inquiries to be a purely bogus one, being apparently the work of one or two swindlers who wanted to get a few pounds out of their dupes. The whole story will be found in the Appendix to evidence, which contains all particulars relating to it. The belief that any contracts for bringing Austrians to the colony have been entered into, is, we are convinced, entirely false—to say nothing of the absurdity of supposing any sensible man to enter into such a contract with men whom he would have no practical means of binding after their arrival. In so far as these allegations are not accounted for by the appearance of the advertisement in question, they must be set down to a spirit either recklessly mischievous or deliberately malevolent. The larger part of the Austrians concerning whom we have been able to inquire seem to have come from Australia, chiefly from the Broken Hill mines.

Such is the state of the question, so far as we can judge, relating to the Austrians; and if they could by any enactment be prevented from coming here, a large number of the diggers would be greatly pleased. But others, who look a little further, see and acknowledge the difficulty of making any such law to affect Austrians only, or in any way differentiating in our legislation to the prejudice of the subjects of a friendly country.

This difficulty is really the origin of the proposal above described, that the license to dig should be given to none except settlers, until they have resided twelve months in the colony. This scheme, it is said, would protect the gumfields against a rush of diggers, alike from Austria, Great Britain, or Australia, and might further be expected to have some effect in promoting the settlement of the country, since the privilege of gum-digging would be given at once to the immigrant who could see his way to take up an allotment of land. This method to be of any use must of course be brought into operation over private as well as Crown lands; but, revenue not being the main object aimed at, the fee might be small, or even nominal.

The objection to the scheme is of course the prohibition to the newly-arrived immigrant, whether British or foreign, of the pursuit of an industry which might keep him from want at first, and perhaps to supply him with means to become a useful settler at a later time. But how far we are agreed upon the question of a license system, and upon the form it should take, will be shown in its proper place.

Whatever form of licensing system, if any, be adopted, the question of the mode of collecting the fees will have to be considered. It has been suggested, and the suggestion seems worthy of consideration, that this might be done through the agency of the storekeeper, who should be provided with a cheque-book from which to issue licenses to all who bring gum to him for sale, receiving a small commission on all he issues. Such a method as this would much facilitate matters if it could be done, and if the storekeeper were willing to incur the risk of having, in many instances, to advance the license-fee, in addition to the other outfit with which he so often has to furnish the impecunious digger. Another question would be whether the license-fees, however collected, should go to the County Councils, or to the Government, and this is closely connected with the further question, in whose hands the construction and maintenance of roads should be placed. We have had strong expressions, although no complete consensus of opinion, that the main county roads, at all events, should be in the hands of the Government, and we think that this opinion is entitled to great weight, provided that, in carrying out road-works, the best local knowledge is always made available.

In connection with this subject we must not fail to mention one striking and mischievous anomaly, which certainly ought not to be allowed to continue another year. This is, that the local bodies almost always have to spend their money on road-work in the winter months, when, it is hardly an exaggeration to say, it is almost entirely wasted. This condition of things arises—so we are assured—from the Treasury regulations, by which it appears the local bodies cannot get