

164. Have you been aware of any system of overcharges made by your firm for the supplies sent in to the Government, either in respect of weight or quantity?—No; certainly not.

165. Have you been aware of any overcharge as to price?—No; certainly not.

166. Do you believe that any of your managers or persons holding a responsible position in your firm are aware of such a practice?—I am quite sure they are not.

167. Now, in regard to this schedule, a large number of errors have been detected by the Government in the ordinary course of checking. You have heard the evidence given before the Committee?—Yes.

168. Do you desire to make any remark on the character of those errors?—Yes; I think I do. I should like to state first that what I am going to say is entirely extempore. I have not had the opportunity—and I do not expect an opportunity—of giving an opinion in connection with these things. I would, therefore, like to say something in regard to the character of these errors. The more so, because I have had a varied experience, extending throughout these colonies, in connection with the execution of Government contracts of this description, and of others. I should say as to the errors which have been disclosed by the department this: in consultation with my brother, who is a partner in this concern, we decided that I should come up here and investigate these matters. I did so, and in connection with those errors I say that, while I found on the part of the man that had charge apparent carelessness and—it was not quite blundering, although it might be called—blundering, still I felt that I could not, as an expert in the trade and an employer, altogether blame this man for his apparent carelessness and blundering.

169. Do you mean Jenkins?—I am speaking now of Bridson. I say it is impossible for me, as an expert, to blame him in this matter, knowing as I do that there was such an exceedingly clever young man as Mr. Jenkins working at his elbow all the time. This person I refer to has been shown to be an exceedingly clever young man, and I cannot help saying that, let an ironmonger be as expert as he may, with such a man working for his own ends all the time, I am quite satisfied that chaos would be sure to follow.

170. There are a number of alterations in Jenkins's handwriting, are there not?—Yes.

171. A good number of articles are not weighed, but the principal alterations relate to the prices made up according to the schedule. Is it common to find errors of that kind in all Government contracts?—It is usual, principally because of the exceedingly complicated nature of these schedules. As regards this particular schedule, it is the most complicated schedule I have ever seen, and I have seen a good many.

172. Apart from its complexity, it varies the manner of charging for articles not customary in private trade?—That is so.

173. And therefore creates a deal of difficulty and confusion?—That is so.

174. Are not errors of the kind likely to crop up in dealing with a contract of this kind?—Yes; but in this case specially a great many items are put under heads which are not correct headings at all. If I were asked, as an expert ironmonger, to find some lines under these headings, I am quite sure I would not be able to find them if I looked under the technical heading for the line in question.

175. You say these alterations are hardly preventible?—They are not preventible at all; they cannot be prevented; I defy any one to prevent them.

176. Now, with regard to the alterations here, your remarks do not apply to them?—No they do not.

177. Of these items, personally you know nothing?—No, I have heard of them, and the explanation which you, I understand, are going to bring out later on.

178. Have the circumstances of this inquiry been made use of by private firms against the reputation and standing of your firm?—Yes, that is so.

179. In only one place or throughout the colony?—Right through the colony—this colony at all events—from Auckland to the Bluff.

180. Has that affected your credit?—No, Sir, it has not.

181. Why do you object to it?—Why I object to it is, because I consider it a very disreputable way of trying to injure a good old concern; that is why.

182. You can say that exaggerated and untrue accounts of the nature of this inquiry have been circulated through the colony?—Yes, I can say that.

183. *Mr. Reid.*] Can you tell us how long Biddell was in your employment?—I cannot tell, but I remember his being in the employment when I was a lad; that is twenty years ago.

184. What position did he occupy?—He was commercial traveller. I can give only a bare idea as to when he left.

185. Did you look on him as a practical ironmonger?—Oh, yes.

186. You heard him state he compiled this schedule?—I did.

187. Did it strike you that, being a man of such experience, he was peculiarly fitted for such work?—It did not strike me so; our business is such a complicated business; one of the main features is the enormous amount of detail; any man who does not keep himself posted up to date will get behind in a few months; and no man who is not posted up to date is competent to make up a reliable schedule of this character.

188. *Mr. Montgomery.*] You say you inquired on your own account as to these tents?—Yes; I did.

189. You cannot give evidence on the matter, but you were satisfied with the explanation given to you?—Yes; perfectly satisfied.

190. *Mr. T. Mackenzie.*] What articles in the schedule are charged other than the usual trade system?—I could not tell from memory. I have been through this schedule very carefully myself, and I could show you the items I refer to if you care to place this schedule before me, and let me go through it. There are a good many of them.