

always anxious to pay off as soon as they can, to relieve the pressure from those relations. The money so got is supposed to come from the *Crédit Foncier* bank, but I have not real information on the matter. I have heard rumours to the effect that certain leaseholders have introduced Austrians to work their gum-lands, but I do not believe it. I think the collecting of license-fees from gum-diggers is not practicable, because of the difficulty of collection. I do not think it practicable even to make the production of a license to the gum-buyer, because many men, when arriving on the fields, are often in such a state of destitution that it would be cruel to deny them the right to live. I do not think that the gum-digger should be taxed directly by a license, as I think he contributes quite enough to the revenue already. He spends most of his earnings in food, clothing, and beer. The Austrians in this district in the last year or two have changed their mode of living, and live more like Englishmen, even to the extent of drinking beer, but not to excess. I have been in such close connection with the gum-digger that I have thought there should be a small export duty, sufficient to provide for them in case of sickness or old age. My reason for this is that already the small landowners and small settlers have their road-rates practically swallowed up by charitable aid, leaving them no funds for the roads. But in advocating an export duty of 5s. I would also suggest that the gum-diggers should nominate a man to each County Council, so that he should see that the funds so raised are properly expended only among their own people. The export duty on kauri-gum should be spent only in the districts in which the gum is raised. I think that the country should get some value for the gum exported, as shown by a parallel case that I have lately seen in print. It is as follows: "Amber in Prussia.—The working of amber in Prussia is a monopoly which the Government lease to a firm paying a royalty of 600,000 marks a year. A good deal of amber is found entangled in seaweed on the sands at Pellac after north-westerly gales, and last year 100 tons of this crude amber were brought to Dantzic for manufacture. Excepting the best bits, which are reserved for beads, and mouthpieces for pipes and cigar-holders, the whole of this is used for making lac and varnish." I would like the Commissioners to make inquiries from the German Consul whether the condition of labour is affected by the money which was paid by the company to the Government for the sale of amber. As to the amount of gum sold to me by individual diggers, two men in a month got cash £18 4s. 4d., the following month the same two men got cash £22 0s. 3d., and in the three weeks following they got £18 11s. 8d. The fields here were supposed to be considerably reduced years ago, but last year my books show that the production was equal in value to previous years, although, of course, the amount of gum has not been the same.

HIKURANGI, 27TH JANUARY, 1898.

Albert Thomas Bennett: I have only been eight months in this district, but have been in Kawakawa since I was a lad. All this time I have been connected with the kauri-gum industry. I have never dug myself. My father was in the trade before me. The yield of gum is falling off, but the price is of higher value. I do not think that the advance in price quite compensates for the less quantity of gum they obtain. The average wages of a gum-digger ten years ago was from £2 to £3, but there are lot of diggers who do not make tucker. I should think £1 10s. to £2 is about the average now of a good digger. There are no Austrians on the Hikurangi fields. We keep a store. The British digger's living costs about 10s. to 12s. The cartage in years past was very much heavier than it is now. The cartage would be nowadays one-quarter less than what it was when the gum-diggers earned £3 a week. I think the diggers on leased fields have to pay more for their stores than those digging on the Crown lands, because they must deal with the storekeepers who lease the field. It is an undefined royalty, making their profit out of stores. There is very little profit made in the gum. Gum is a very risky thing to handle, because the price is so fluctuating. The fluctuation in price is just about the same as ten years ago. I believe it is simply the result of supply and demand; it is very seldom the result of "corners." I think the European gum-digger has felt the Austrian influx a great deal by the increased supply of gum, which brings about a proportionate reduction in price, and also by finding gum scarcer after the Austrians have passed over the field. The Austrians are setting about their work in a more systematic manner, and not moving about from place to place as frequently as the British diggers. When the coal-mines are slack the miners take to gum-digging; and there are a great many also employed in the timber trade; so the number of diggers fluctuates a great deal. I have known a few diggers settle down and become agriculturists, but as a rule a gum-digger's occupation is of a roving character. I do not know, if a block of land was offered to the regular gum-diggers, whether they would accept the offer, and become agriculturists. The Austrians generally are sober and industrious, but some of them go on the spree sometimes. I have heard rumours that Austrians have been landed under contract, but I have never had any proof that it was so. The gum-carting cuts up the roads somewhat in the winter time, and the county receives nothing from the *bona fide* gum-digger. I think the gum-diggers are already pretty heavily taxed in what they eat and drink, but it is hardly fair to the counties that they should not receive something from them for the wear-and-tear of the roads. I recognise that a great value of exported gum has come from the North, and I think that a fair proportion of this should have been returned to the North in the shape of the roads that have been destroyed; but I should not be in favour of an export duty if it fell wholly on the gum-digger. I think that an export duty would certainly fall on the digger. If the export of gum could be regulated I believe a steady price from the manufacturers could be insured. I know of no gum-licenses having been issued but by those who possessed private fields, and this was done to reimburse themselves for the cost of the lease held from the Maoris. I do not think the issue of licenses a good way of raising revenue. It would cost as much to collect as the license would bring in, and, moreover, only touching those diggers working on Crown lands. There seems to be a good percentage of old men who only earn their living. This (Hikurangi) is a