

55. Do you import peaches?—Yes, but they do not compare with ours, and they do not come at the same time. We beat them easily in peaches.

56. What other lines are in competition?—Cherries. I suppose there are more cherries imported than we grow.

57. Can you give us any idea of what fruit costs in distribution. Assuming the producer gets 2d. a pound for his apples and the general public buys at 6d., there would be a difference of 4d. to the retailer. What is the cost of distribution to the retailer?—I suppose it runs to about 25 per cent. If we can get 25 per cent. we think we have done very well.

58. Does the difference of 4d. per pound between the price paid to the producer and that paid by the public pay the charges?—I think 40 per cent. would cover it. I am not a grower.

59. Can you suggest a method of bringing the producer into more direct touch with the consumer?—I cannot say that I can.

WILLIAM DARCY MASON, Farmer, examined on oath. (No. 21.)

1. *The Chairman.*] What is your occupation?—I am a farmer at Middelmarsh. I have been farming there about twenty-six years.

2. Do you send your produce to Dunedin?—Yes.

3. Do you consign to the auctioneer generally?—The general method with the majority of farmers is to deal through an agency, such as the National Mortgage, Stronach-Morris, or any of them. We buy and sell through them for convenience sake.

4. Do they make you an advance?—In the case of a man who required an advance they would make him one in the shape of goods or seeds or cash advances. He purchases seeds on credit if he needs it, and sends in his produce.

5. It is a kind of barter?—No.

6. Are these agents themselves auctioneers?—Yes. In all cases they are auctioning through their auctioneers' stuff sent into them. A price is put on by the seller in the majority of cases.

7. Are you and the farmers round you satisfied generally with the prices you receive?—I think as a rule sellers are never satisfied, whether they be farmers or otherwise; but I think they receive fair treatment. Whatever the market price is the farmer gets it, with the usual deductions for the cost of handling. If I have a beast to sell I consign it to the firm I deal with, and they sell it at Burnside. I know what the charges are before sending, and pay them.

8. You have no conception that there might be any ring of persons keeping your price low?—Certainly not among the stock and station agents.

9. *Mr. Fairbairn.*] They are strictly agents?—I have known cases in the past where members of firms bought for export. I think the farmers are treated absolutely fairly by the stock and station agents.

10. The farmers in your district do not deal directly with an auctioneer, but with agents who are auctioneers as well?—That requires a little explanation. There are two or three sets of auctioneers in Dunedin. There are the stock and station men, who act absolutely as agents. They keep a large stock of seeds and grain. In many cases seed and grain is sent in to them by farmers for sale as agents. They may sell to me as selling agents, and if I have to get credit I buy at the market rates. There is a stated price, and with a little margin it is the price quoted in the Press from day to day.

11. *The Chairman.*] It has been known in the case of small farmers dealing with country stores that when once in debt to the storekeeper the storekeeper was able to take their produce at his own price, and the farmer had to take the storekeeper's goods at the storekeeper's price. I suppose there is no question of unfair dealing like that in the case of the firms you talk about?—No. I have known people put in the position you refer to, but so far as Otago is concerned it has died out. The competition is too keen, and the facilities for dealing with leading agents are too good. There are also auctioneers in Dunedin who sell fruit and poultry.

12. Have you heard any grumbling from farmers about these last-mentioned auctioneers?—Yes, but it must be remembered that they are perishable commodities that they deal with. With these auctioneers there is, to a slight extent, a system resembling barter, but I do not know of anything to justify complaints against them. There are grocers in Dunedin in a large way of business who supply country people with stores and take produce, such as eggs and dead pigs, in exchange. They buy the pigs at a certain price.

13. Do they fix that price?—It is certainly fixed by the people who cure the bacon. The price for pigs generally ranges at about half the retail price of bacon. There is the cost of manufacture, of course, but being a seller it always appears to me to be rather a large margin.

14. *Mr. Hall.*] Do they fix the price given for eggs?—I think the price given in the newspapers is a fair market price and an indication of what the producers receive.

15. On what basis does the country storekeeper take eggs?—My neighbours sell to the store I deal with, and I repurchase from the storekeeper at an advance of, say, 2d. per dozen.

16. Is yours a dairying district?—Yes.

17. Is there a creamery?—Yes.

18. Do you send most of your milk to the creamery?—All of it.

19. I suppose there is no farmers' butter manufactured in the district?—Yes, there is more now than previously, because there are greater facilities now of getting separators. Home-separated cream makes good butter, but not, on the average, up to the standard of the factory.

20. What would be the difference between the price of farmers' butter and factory butter?—About 1d. to 2d. per pound in my district. I know of at least one farmer whose butter realizes in Dunedin 1d. per pound more than creamery butter.

21. *Mr. Fairbairn.*] What does your creamery pay for butter-fat?—1s. 0½d. last month. It has been standing at that for some months now.

22. What is the lowest price paid within the last twelve months?—I do not think it has been lower than 10½d., which it was at for one month only, I think.