

WESTLAND.

(R. S. GALBRAITH, Commissioner of Crown Lands.)

Inquiries for land by discharged soldiers are steadily increasing, and any land which can be opened for selection will no doubt be required in this connection. The Crown lands available are mostly of rather poor quality, being worked-out milling-bush, which in this district, owing to the heavy rainfall and rapid second growth, is difficult and expensive to bring into cultivation. Most of the returned men consequently show a preference for improved farms which give them a more immediate and certain return, and are obtaining advances from the Department to enable them to purchase.

The soldiers already on the land appear of a good class, and are energetically clearing and improving their holdings.

CANTERBURY.

(H. D. M. HASZARD, Commissioner of Crown Lands.)

During the year the largest settlements under the above heading suffered severely from the heavy snowfall in July, the principal sufferers being those at Lees Valley and Clayton, and also Cricklewood to a lesser extent. The snow losses in the former amounted to about six thousand sheep and sixty head of cattle; and many miles of fencing, erected at a heavy cost consequent on the high price of material, was seriously damaged. The situation was saved to a considerable extent by the promptitude of the Rangers, ably assisted by the officers of the Agricultural Department, in procuring large quantities of hay and other feed and despatching it where most urgently required.

As most of the soldier settlements have only been in operation a short time it is somewhat premature to comment on them, except to say that the outlook, as far as can be seen, is decidedly promising.

During the year a disastrous fire occurred on the Port Levy Settlement, resulting in the total loss of many hundred sheep and 1,500 acres of good feed, in addition to which a large number of sheep were seriously depreciated in value. Apart from this misfortune the prospects of this settlement are very encouraging.

The settlement of the soldiers on the land made a very strenuous period for the members of the Land Board, to whom the thanks of the Department are due for their untiring services. There were eleven ordinary meetings, extending over twenty-three days, and also five special meetings. The transfers dealt with amounted to 273, of which 255 were approved.

OTAGO.

(ROBERT T. SADD, Commissioner of Crown Lands.)

Of the lands of this description opened in this district all the fifteen sections on the Benmore Runs have been selected. Most of the settlers are doing well, and most of the others are in a fair way to make a decent living. There were heavy losses in stock last winter, not so much from the actual snowfalls as from the after-effects of shortage of feed, chiefly due to either the carelessness or want of knowledge of the settlers in not growing winter feed for their stock. On Clifton Settlement 2,274 acres are now held—nine farms; and the remaining thirteen farms, of 3,218 acres, are still to let on permanent tenure. Those who have been long enough on the land to get a return have good prospects of success, and I feel sure, in spite of the persistent set made by the local people against this settlement (which has seriously retarded its selection), that it will all be taken up before many months and will prove a success.

Westcott Settlement: 756 acres of this settlement are held by five soldiers, who have fair prospects of success by exercising perseverance and good farming. The smaller sections, of probably some of the richest mica-schist soil in Otago—or, in fact, the Dominion—are still unselected, but if opened to the public would be taken up at once. The soldiers as a rule do not seem to care for anything but sheep-farming in large areas.

The seven soldiers on Gladbrook, in spite of not getting on to the land until August, are doing remarkably well, owing to the favourable season and proximity to railway and market. The balance of these farms, twenty-two in number will be opened for selection on the 14th May, and will be readily selected.

A good many soldiers have had advances made to them in order to acquire private lands. The number of these properties bought has tended to inflate land-prices. A prominent feature also of the purchases for soldiers is the number of speculators and others who are anxious to unload indifferent properties often under the guise of patriotism. The prices asked for many such places are a disgrace. On past experience it seems almost advisable to suggest either a waiting policy until the prices of land, material, &c., are normal again, or, better still, to put into force the compulsory clause of the Act and take suitable properties at a fair valuation. In the meantime every possible precaution is taken in getting separate reports and valuations to prevent the soldiers from being exploited.

Generally the soldiers are doing well, and as long as only men of some experience and a fair amount of capital of their own are allowed to select land all will be well, but otherwise disaster to the soldier and heavy loss to the Crown will be the result. A great number of residential properties are being acquired by soldiers, and great care is being taken to be sure that the purchasers have some interest in the property themselves and will be able to carry out their obligations.

In connection with this work relating to discharged soldiers I most heartily commend the Clerical Branch of this Department for their excellent work. This class of work has more than doubled their duties, and it is being carried out cheerfully and efficiently. This is being done by a staff seriously depleted owing to the war, and the majority are junior officers.