

From "Provincial Pride, No 7, August 1961

EXTRACTS FROM
Gabriel Read's Letter
to
Major Richardson

Kensington (Tasmania),
15th April, 1869.

My Dear Major Richardson,

The receipt of your kind letter afforded me unqualified pleasure. My wife and I were very proud on receiving your congratulations ; more especially when I was able to inform her that they would not have been sent were they not sincere and from the depths of the heart. By the kindness of a neighbour I have from time to time had an opportunity of looking at some Otago newspapers. I was glad to see that you took so leading a part in the direction of the affairs of the colony of New Zealand. I always thought the people of Otago committed an ungracious act and one which reflected on their shrewdness when they permitted Mr. Harris to supplant you in the Superintendency ; although his promises were more honied than yours, and his eagerness for office contrasted, ridiculously, with your indifference. I trust that inclination, or any other cause than ill health, was at the bottom of your retirement from the post you so honourably filled in the administration of the Government.

I am sorry to learn that the farmers and squatters of the Colony of New Zealand are so depressed by the altered state of the markets. If to learn, that our neighbours suffer in common with ourselves, were any consolation, the position of your Province is not a singular one : what with low prices and scant crops our farmers have been almost ruined to a man the last two years. For my part, I commenced farming when produce bore a high price, and the next year it was scarcely saleable. I have been at it more than three years, during which time I have invariably found a loss on all my agricultural operations ; and despite my screwing and paring in every direction an impossibility of making ends meet. In Victoria, Adelaide, and New South Wales, I am told, it is much the same. Tasmanian soils have been exhausted by a course of thriftless farming, and it is vain to dream of competing with those who possess the soil with its virgin fertility. The average return of cereals in your province, as reported, is more than double what it is with us, in addition to which we have to incur great expense for artificial manures, without the aid of which, it were worse than folly to cast the seed upon the land. I have left off ploughing on my lands and content myself with running a few head of milch cows, and have commenced growing a few acres of hops, the only produce which promises remuneration at present, from which fact, I am afraid its culture will soon be overdone. We are getting, in these colonies, to be all producers, and I am afraid we shall suffer in common from want of markets.

About seeds of indigenous flowering plants, your wishes shall be attended to, and I will forward you some, although I am of opinion we have few to compare with the hibiscus, tetokay (titoki), karaka, and the bright berried parasitical plants which ornament the woods of your Northern Island. I am busy with hop picking, but that once finished, will not forget to forward you such as I think will add the charm of variety to your grounds at the Puerua.

I was very sorry to see that old Major Croker's services were dispensed with. For my part I always thought he acquitted himself well. The bluff old soldier marched straight and triumphantly through difficulties which would have vanquished a less ingenuous mind. I trust he may have been able to lay something by for the support of his declining years and large family. When last at Tuapeka I heard that Mrs. Croker had just made a twain addition to the infant population of "Lawrence". I'm afraid the gold diggings have left few of us much better circumstanced in 1869 than they found us in 1861 when they commenced. "Riches have wings, and take for themselves flight" is as true

as trite, but how few can credit the aphorism until they have realised it. I do not think, under these circumstances, I had such good reason to complain of the scantiness of the Provincial estimate of my services, as the discrepancy in the rate they placed on them, and those of others less signal ; as for your part in the matter, I had only to complain that your recommended me repeatedly in such terms of eulogy as you shamed me, and provoked the envy and malice of some of my pretended friends. I also had a duty paramount to all considerations, to use my best endeavours to prevent any misapprehension as to the extent of our goldfields from reaching Victoria; I neither spared pains nor expense to make myself conversant with the state of things, and shall never forget to feel grateful for the noble manner in which you seconded me with your unique proclamation, which elicited the admiration and applause of the entire colonial community, was approved of even in the columns of the London "Times", and has had its influence on the relations of the diggers and the Government, almost down to the present day. I cannot feel sorry that I thwarted the designs of some schemers even at the forfeit of their good will. I considered the game was between commercial greed, and men's lives and domestic happiness. I addressed a memorial to the General Government about two years ago, I was aware that there were almost "insuperable difficulties" to their dealing with my case, but thought that Sir G. Grey's first visit to the Middle Island afforded an opportunity which could not occur again, and that Mr. Stafford's was a resolute and generous spirit and might be moved by a strong case; I have not altered my estimate of the man, but relinquished a "hope to which I was flattered" by official parties in Otago. I was at the time stung with the pressure of embarrassments which I have partially conquered, and yet trust to crawl out of and feeling my case was a strong one, I memorialised for a consideration which, under less trying circumstances, I would have disdained to think of.

As regards weeds ; we have almost everything you can think of, including the Cape weed, which I recognise by your description ; although I had never previously heard it called by any name. We have a greater trouble in the shape of the Californian thistle, a variegated perennial, which will root down six or ten feet in the alluvial lands, which propagates from its jointed roots, like the couch grass, as well as from its seeds. I had about four or five rods when I came to this farm ; they have cost me from ten to twelve pounds trenching and trying to eradicate; the smallest piece of root will sprout again from the greatest depth, and suffered to remain undisturbed they destroy all vegetation (monopolising the land) and no stock seems to touch them. One of the finest districts in this colony is being over-run by the pest. Do not defer for a single day, should you recognise it, but root out stock and sewn (sic) ; neglected, in a few years it might render the rich lands of Clutha and its tributaries next to valueless, and there has been such an interchange of commodities between your colony and ours that I am in fear that all such weeds as we have here will soon be found there.

And now respected Sir, I find that without premeditation I have extended this letter to bounds beyond good manners, and send a task which may test your complacence.

My wife and I live well isolated amidst a rather populous neighbourhood. So seldom do I take a pen, so often thump with axe and maul, that I possess anything but a facility of writing. My circumstances have compelled me to an inactivity in which I have gathered more rust than might have formed ten years on Mount Egmont, or reclining luxuriously the same time on the apex of the steeple that overlooks the Nokami (Nokomai). If I could obtain some public employment that promised the most modest subsistence, I should be tempted to shirk the anxieties incidental to a Tasmanian farmer's life (I can see little prospect for any of my compeers) and sit down thankfully to the dinner of herbs and peace therewith. I have secured a good industrious, frugal and devoted wife of my own age. I believe she would save without pinching out of a fixed income of sixpence a year ; but I sometimes regret neglected opportunities, when I reflect that my time is wasted in an occupation that offers no chance of improving our circumstances, and should I die she would be left to combat the world with very slender resources but the good stock she possesses in herself. What is passed may not be recalled. To think right, I know, is to think and feel that a kind Providence knows what is best for us, but it is hard to do so when you hear the wolf howling in the distant wood, and think he may soon be at the door.

Yours sincerely and ever grateful,
THOS. GABRIEL READ.