

BURNS, PHILP AND COMPANY,
Limited.

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LAND SETTLEMENT

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NEW HEBRIDES.

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BURNS, PHILIP AND COMPANY

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INTRODUCTION.

THE New Hebrides Archipelago embraces an extremely fertile group of islands of volcanic origin, distant about 1500 miles from the Australian coast, and extending in a S.S.E. direction about 380 miles from the parallels of $14^{\circ} 40'$ to $20^{\circ} 30'$ south, and between the meridians of $166^{\circ} 30'$ and $170^{\circ} 30'$ east.

The largest of these is the northernmost island, Santo, about 60 miles long by 33 miles wide. These islands early attracted the attention of Australian public and commercial men, who realised that they must eventually come under the control of Australia, owing to their proximity to our shores.

The islands were, over 40 years ago, a rendezvous of whaling vessels in the South Seas. Whaling stations were established at Aneityum and other islands, and the group was regularly visited by trading vessels from Sydney and elsewhere, to obtain cargoes of copra and other island products, by barter, from the natives.

In 1848 the Presbyterian Mission established their first station in the group, from which they steadily extended their operations, and to-day their influence extends from one end of the archipelago to the other, and there is scarcely a mile of coast on any of the islands that is not within the scope of one or other of their numerous mission stations, and wherever established an European may now land in perfect safety.

Meanwhile, Australian commercial interests had also been steadily progressing, but they received their first impetus in 1888, when several Sydney and Melbourne commercial men, realising the danger of French influence spreading over and controlling the New Hebrides from New Caledonia, formed themselves into a company, styled the "Australasian New Hebrides Company," their objects being to foster Australian trade and to counteract the efforts made by France, through

heavily-subsidised commercial companies, to obtain control of the group.

This Company acquired extensive tracts of land in the most fertile parts of the group, and established steam communication with Sydney, thus superseding the old and necessarily irregular sailing-ship service hitherto maintained by the trading vessels.

By arrangement with the A.U.S.N. Company regular inter-island services were maintained by the steamer *Truganini*, and subsequently by the steamer *Croydon*, connecting at Aneityum with the larger steamers of the same Company, plying between Sydney and Fiji. In 1897, the Australasian New Hebrides Company, finding the work too extensive for them and having lost about £25,000 in the venture, went into liquidation, and but for the action of Burns, Philp and Co., Limited, in stepping into the breach and taking up the service, the islands would probably have drifted from British control. The latter Company took over the whole of the properties of the old Australasian New Hebrides Company, placed their own steamers in the trade, and built it up practically unassisted, their only subsidy being an amount of £2100 per annum, granted them conjointly by the New South Wales and Victorian Governments for the carriage of mails. In April, 1900, a vessel of 1763 tons, the s.s. *Mambare*, specially designed and built for the trade, was placed in the service, running regularly on the first of every alternate month from Sydney, and marking another important advance in Australian trade.

Two French chartered companies, semi-politically controlled and supported by liberal subsidies, have in succession been formed and succumbed, and it is understood that a third company is now being formed in France to continue the effort for supremacy. Colonising operations have been vigorously carried on by these companies, and thriving French settlements are springing up in various parts of the group.

Upon the establishment of the Commonwealth, the Federal Government quickly realised the necessity for prompt action if the trade of these valuable islands was to be retained.

A contract was accordingly entered into for a monthly steam service from Sydney instead of once every two months as hitherto, the Company agreeing to throw open for settlement the whole of their valuable lands in the Hebrides and to convey to the islands free of charge such settlers as may be approved of by the Commonwealth Government, together with their wives and families.

The first party left Sydney by the s.s. *Mambare* on June 1, and are now installed in their homes. These men express themselves exceedingly well-pleased with the prospects, and several of them sent for their families. The second party left by the s.s. *Mambare* on August 1; and small parties of about ten settlers will be dispatched at intervals until the whole of the Company's lands in the Hebrides are occupied.

An exceptional opening is thus afforded to those possessed of sufficient capital to clear and plant their land and maintain themselves until their crops arrive at maturity.

CONDITIONS OF SETTLEMENT.

- (a) LEASES to be to British subjects only.
- (b) AREA OF LEASE not to be less than 50, nor more than 500 acres, with the right to the father of a family to take up an adjoining block not exceeding 100 acres, if available, for each male child over 16 years of age.
- (c) TERM OF LEASE to be for three years at a rental of one shilling per 50 acres, with a right of extension for ninety-six (96) years at a rental of one penny per acre per annum, if at the end of the third year the settler has expended the sum of ten shillings per acre on the land.
- (d) TRANSFER.—Settlers to have the right to assign or sublet their leasehold or any part thereof to any British subject, on the approval of the lessors. Leases, assignments, or sub-leases to be under the condition that the holders will not transmit the land or any of it by will except to British subjects approved by the lessors or their representatives.
- (e) At the end of the third year, and after the performance of the improvement conditions, settlers to have the right of applying for a further block.
- (f) No block may have a greater water frontage than one foot to every ten feet depth.
- (g) Until the establishment of settled government there can be no absolute title given to land in the New Hebrides. The whole of the Company's lands have been duly registered at the Lands Titles Office in Fiji, and ownership of them so far is undisputed. An international land commission is being diplomatically arranged for between England and France

to examine all land titles in the New Hebrides and settle ownerships definitely. It is to be distinctly understood that, although the Company are acting in good faith and do not anticipate that their title to any portion of their lands will be disputed, they cannot give any guarantee. In the event, however, of any rival claim being established to such lands, another block of land of equal extent will be at once granted, but no claim can in any case be made against the Company.

- (h) Settlers will be conveyed with their wives and families to the islands, free, in the Company's vessels, together with the ordinary amount of personal effects carried by steamshipping companies, viz.: 20 cubic feet per adult. Any other goods will be carried as ordinary cargo at current rates, viz.: general merchandise 50s. per ton, timber 8s. 4d. per 100 superficial feet.

The lands are not yet cut up into settlement blocks, but, when the settlements are fairly established, a surveyor will most probably be sent down by the authorities to survey and mark off the several leases.

CROPS.

The principal industry will be the growing of cocoa-nut trees from which the copra of commerce is manufactured. The tree begins to bear in about five years from the time it is planted, and in eight to ten years is in full bearing and is estimated to produce a steady revenue of 1s. per tree per annum. Quicker growing crops such as maize, bananas, ground nuts, haricot beans, cocoa, coffee, &c., may be planted in the first instance to produce an immediate return, and are planted between the rows of young cocoa-nut trees. In this connection it may be instructive to the new settler to point out that the following directions should be observed in planting out their land, viz.:—

MAIZE.—To be planted in rows four feet apart. Three grains should be planted in each hole, the latter to be six inches in depth and two feet apart. After 18 months, that is to say, after three crops have been garnered, the growth of bananas (another quick-growing crop) will not allow of the cultivation of corn.

BANANAS.—To be planted 16 feet apart. The first crop may be expected after 10 months, in full bearing after 18 months; after the first six months allow a second shoot to grow out, never more than four shoots from a single plant—say, let one shoot grow every two months.

COCOA-NUTS.—To be planted 32 feet apart.

COCOA.—After four years the growth of the cocoa-nut tree will no longer allow the cultivation of corn or bananas, but the special shade of the cocoa-nut tree will allow of the planting of a row of *cocoa* between every row of cocoa-nut trees; the cocoa plants should be 16 feet apart in the row.

After four or five years of careful cultivation in the way indicated, the cocoa-nut tree will bear its first produce; before 10 years the plantation will be in full bearing and its upkeep in no way increased.

The new settler is recommended not to waste valuable time in clearing his land of tree stumps with a view of preparing it for the plough, as these methods are not necessary in the New Hebrides, and labour being an expensive item, he will find it more profitable and equally efficacious to burn the stumps carefully at the base around the roots, and at the end of say four years they will disappear without further effort. In the case of cocoa, which may be planted simultaneously with the other products mentioned, it will be wise to leave trees, in clearing the land, with a shade radius of say 20 feet to protect the cocoa-tree.

COFFEE.—Owing to the depression in the coffee market, it is not recommended that the latter article be extensively cultivated at present.

Maize must undoubtedly be the settler's *mainstay*, as it gives a quick return, and is not a difficult crop to cultivate. Five crops in two years may be depended upon, averaging for the first year about 50 bushels per acre, falling off the second and third year to about 40 bushels, after which a change of crop is desirable to obtain the best results from the land.

Maize under proper management costs 9d. per bushel to grow, and for eight months in the year can be sold on the spot at prices varying from 1s. to 2s. per bushel, according to the time of year when river-grown maize is plentiful on the Sydney market, namely March to September. It is then, however, that his attention may be directed to the other quick-growing crops mentioned and with satisfactory results.

Indiarubber is an article of commerce which has been entirely neglected in the New Hebrides, possibly owing to the length of time it takes for the trees to arrive at maturity. That it will succeed well is evidenced by the fact that it is indigenous in the adjacent islands of New Caledonia and Loyalties, where a considerable quantity is regularly gathered by the natives from the native trees and exported to Europe. This is an article of commerce which in these days of pneumatic tyres and other innumerable uses is of the highest commercial value, and a few acres of rubber trees, planted now, would prove a magnificent asset and steady source of revenue in 12 to 15 years time. As in all tropical agriculture, once the plant has attained a reasonable size it is able to hold its own in the battle for existence unaided, except for a little attention to keep down weeds. All such crops, however, are matters for attention after the settler is thoroughly established, and his "bread and butter" in the early stages of his plantations must be his maize crops, which, owing to their quick returns, easy cultivation, and heavy crops, prove the mainstay of those who have already done the experimental part of the pioneering work.

Tobacco is another article, which although not yet extensively proved, there is every reason to believe will soon become a valuable and profitable export, provided the right sorts are

grown. Coarse and common tobaccos always have been and always will be a failure commercially, but in German and Dutch New Guinea, and other parts of the Pacific, tobacco of an extremely valuable kind is grown, and realises high prices in the European markets, being used entirely for a higher class of manufacture, such as cigar wrappings, &c.

The settlers established under French auspices are doing very well, and building up cocoa-nut plantations while supporting themselves from the profits of their maize and similar crops. Once the cocoa-nut trees come into bearing the settler's troubles may be said to be over, and a valuable property will be affording a steady and reliable income. Cattle do well in the Archipelago, but owing to the heavy rainfall, which averages 80 inches per annum, and the consequent humidity of the climate, sheep do not thrive as well as could be desired. Goats, however, seem to find the conditions extremely suitable for them, and scarcely any settlement is without its flock, supplying the pioneers with milk and fresh meat, and proving themselves invaluable labourers in the cocoa-nut plantations, where they keep down the weeds and vines which grow in such wild luxuriance under the favourable climatic conditions. These vines would entail considerable expenditure in labour to keep them from quickly overrunning the trees, were it not for the constant feeding down they get from the planters' four-footed auxiliaries. Where settlements are not sufficiently large to enable cattle to be slaughtered profitably for food, the flesh of a young kid is not to be despised as a welcome change from the salted and tinned provisions which at one time were the staple articles of animal food in the islands. There are no noxious animals to devastate the growing crops, and the greatest interference to be guarded against is an inroad of your neighbours' pigs or other domestic animals among the more tender crops.

LABOUR.

The all-important question of tropical agriculture is that of labour. With the cessation of recruiting for Queensland, owing to the action of the P. Is. Act, the only outlet for labour will be the island plantations. Experience has shown that it is impossible to depend for plantation work solely upon labour from the neighbouring villages. The local labourer may engage himself for a term, but the attractions of the free and easy life of his native village invariably lead him to throw up his contract, and casual labourers, when most urgently required, are usually engaged in local festivities, &c. The only effective plan, therefore, has been found to engage labourers from neighbouring islands, and, thus removed from domestic attractions, they prove, if well treated, willing and industrious workers.

They are engaged for a term of three years, and are paid at the rate of £6 per annum and their maintenance. As their mode of living is very simple, the only expense, above the food which is grown upon the plantation, is for a little rice and meat, and some simple clothing suited to their habits. If kindly treated, they work well and contentedly, and the majority will usually re-engage for a further term at the expiration of their agreements at a slightly-increased wage, which is far outweighed by the skill and intelligence resulting from their previous term of service. With three or four such labourers, an immediate start may be made with the clearing of the land, the chief impediment being the cutting of the dense tangle of undergrowth, which overruns the most fertile tracts. The larger trees are usually left untouched in the early days of the plantations, as also are the stumps of all but the small and easily removable trees. Experience has shown that removal of these stumps is quite unnecessary, as all they require is that the brushwood to be burnt shall be piled around them to char the stumps and prevent them again sprouting, when they entirely disappear within four years of the felling of the tree. Expensive agricultural instruments are scarcely required, as with the cheap

native labour work can be more economically performed than by the labour-saving contrivances of civilisation, where manual labour is a great factor of cost. The early settlers, however, who will have the pick of the land, will have no difficulty in choosing comparatively clear and well-watered blocks, on many of which numbers of cocoa-nuts may be found already growing and in full bearing; although not in sufficient quantities to yield a living to the settler, they will still form a valuable nucleus to the coming plantation.

TRADING.

The bulk of the British residents at present in the group support themselves by trading with the natives for copra, which is purchased in most instances by a system of barter, the natives receiving in exchange the tobaccos, calicoes, knives, axes, &c., &c., so dear to the native heart. This is a line of industry, however, which may be entirely excluded from the new settlers' sphere of action. There are already as many traders in the group as can find profitable employment, and any further accession to their ranks would only lead to cut-throat competition and ultimate failure. The settler's aim is to be a copra producer—not a losing competitor in the ranks of copra traders. The copra of commerce is the dried flesh of the matured coconut, for which there is a steady demand throughout the civilised world, where it is used for a variety of purposes, the oil being first expressed to be used in the manufacture of soaps, &c., and the residue is manufactured into cake for cattle-feeding, and also for the manufacture of paper, &c. The world's demand at the present time, both for copra and indiarubber, far exceeds the output, and there is every indication that profitable prices will be permanently maintained.

DISPOSAL OF CROPS.

The communication with the islands is maintained by steamers leaving Sydney regularly on the first of every month. These vessels will call on the settlers both on their outward and inward voyages, about a week elapsing between the first and second visit.

They carry a well-equipped store, ranging from the proverbial needle to the traditional anchor, and including midway almost every article of necessity or luxury required by civilized peoples. These stocks include groceries, ironmongery, fancy goods, drugs, medicines, &c., &c., which are sold at reasonable rates, and any articles not carried on the steamer are procurable with all despatch from Sydney on the order being given to the supercargo—an official who travels with the steamer to transact the Company's business.

Crops are purchased each trip on the spot at market rates for cash, and the fact that the Company have for years been steadily holding the trade against all competition is a guarantee that the producer will receive fairest treatment. It is to be clearly understood, however, that the grower is in no way bound other than by self-interest to dispose of his crops in this manner, but may ship his produce on freight to his own agents in Sydney to be disposed of to the best advantage. A maximum freight rate is set out in the mail contract for the protection of the settlers.

The rate for general cargo from Sydney to the islands is 50s. per ton deadweight or measurement. The return freight to Sydney is 40s. per ton for copra and 20s. per ton for maize.

A British Resident Deputy Commissioner has been appointed to watch British interests in the group and promote the welfare of the settlers, and everything possible is being done to render the undertaking an unqualified success from its very inception.

CLIMATE.

The climatic conditions are similar to those obtaining in the rich sugar districts of Cairns and Johnston River, of Queensland.

The rainfall is plentiful, and regularly distributed, causing all kinds of vegetation to flourish luxuriantly. A certain amount of malarial fever may be expected during the operation of clearing away the dense, indigenous vegetation, but experience shows that once the land is cleared and placed under cultivation, fever becomes a negligible quantity.

At Vila (Sandwich Island), where the leading settlement is situated, and the land is generally cleared, malaria is only now found in the mildest forms. Even in the virgin country, malaria is not as serious as in those parts of tropical Australia blessed with a generous rainfall. Missionaries and settlers with their families are at present established all over the group, and do not find the climate any serious impediment to their welfare.

It would, however, be very inadvisable for settlers to bring their wives and young children to the islands until their new homes are prepared to receive them. The free passage will hold good, under such circumstances.

Malaria gets blamed for a good deal of ill-health that is directly traceable to other causes, such as erection of houses amongst scrub or swampy ground, inattention to underclothing, unnecessary exposure to night dews, intemperance, &c. Moderately healthy people of temperate habits, who pay reasonable attention to diet, clothing, &c., have nothing to fear from climatic influences. Considerable harm is done in tropical countries by the intemperate use of quinine, which, while invaluable both as a preventive and curative of malaria, may, if used to excess, do serious injury to the system.

GENERAL REMARKS.

The amount of capital required by the intending settler cannot be fixed by any hard-and-fast rule; so much depends upon the energy and capability of the individual. An amount which would be ample for a practical and frugal agriculturalist would perhaps be frittered away by another before the actual work of planting was fairly commenced.

The erection of a house alone may mean anything from £10 to £300. For the lesser sum a comfortable and healthy house may be built by local labour, after the native fashion, from the leaves of the cocoa-nut and pandanus trees, which will last until the settler is in a position to build a more pretentious dwelling. The same thing applies to the ownership of a cutter for the recruiting of labourers. One vessel would be able to supply the wants of a whole settlement, provided an arrangement is come to between the members of the community to co-operate with one another.

All the manual labour is performed by the native labourers, and the white man's energies are devoted solely to the directing and supervising of the hands, that their labour may be utilised to the best advantage.

The Company will cordially co-operate to ensure the welfare of the settlement by every means in its power, and trusts that the result will be the addition at an early date of a valuable group of islands, peopled by a thriving agricultural community, to the Australian Commonwealth.

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