

FORESTRY AND LAND

FUTURE OF TASMANIAN TIMBER.

THE FEDERAL ATTITUDE.

(By S. Sutchkoff.)

Or would it not be better to say, "Forestry versus Land?" It is just to what it amounts at present. It seems that the Forestry Department could not find a more suitable place to establish its reserves than in a farmer's paddock. For what is the Far North-West, if not the remaining last paddock of agricultural Tasmania? They might argue that it is handy to roads and railways, but surely roads and railways have been constructed not with the object of growing bush. They would be too expensive for that purpose. Only an agricultural country would justify these expenses. Meantime, they are picking up the richest lumps of the Far North-West and proclaiming them state forests. It was recently announced that they reserved a large area of swamp country on Arthur River for state forests. The exact position was not indicated, but it is understood that it is the same swamp that was intended not long ago to be drained and opened for closer settlement. And there is 500 acres of state forest on Roger River, within 1½ miles of the existing railway terminus, within half a mile of the existing metalled road, and within half a mile of the proposed Rogerton railway station. Isn't it handy? Why, only Macquarie-street itself, if shut up for state forest, would be handier. And how many farms have the same railway and road facilities?

Putting aside the question of economic wastage, we may ask only this: Is it possible to save these 500 acres, surrounded by agricultural farms, from a bush fire for the next, say, hundred years, to give a chance to young blackwood to attain something like maturity? There can be no more than one opinion: It is absolutely impossible. Only babies and forestry officers can fancy that a creek, running through the bush, will stop fire. And as to the Forestry Office poster, stuck all over the country and propounding a revelation that one tree will make a million matches, and one match will burn a million trees, it might impress some less intelligent schoolboys with its platitudinous inexactitude, but certainly it never will stop a bush fire. This part is only amusing in its naivete. But what is most glowingly evident and important, is economic wastage. They are reserving for state forests the richest swamp lands, similar to that of Smithton or Mowbray Swamp. Smith-

ton or Mowbray Swamp. Smithton Swamp people claim that the cultivated land on the swamp will easily average £100 per acre annual profit, and in the year of favourable prices, like last one, some profits ran as high as £250 per acre. It is not official statistics, though it would be very interesting to have them. But it is our Government's way; dreaming unhealthy dreams of some problematical and, probably, impossible industry, and neglecting the natural wealth of the country. The Smithton Swamp went for cultivation on considerable scale only recently, but there are few paddocks that have been cultivated year after year for a good few years, always producing enormous, hardly credible crops, independently of season, both dry and wet. My personal opinion is that even growing potatoes on this land is in a sense wastage, because the land, coupled with congenial climate, will grow to perfection the most valuable vegetables, and then the average profit per acre will rise from £100 to £500 and, probably, £1000. Five-acre farms will be all that would be needed, and with producers' organisation and the Government's benevolence behind it, it would be possible to turn our swamp lands into the vegetable garden of the Commonwealth.

TIMBER OR AGRICULTURE?

I am afraid it is a dream of my own, though I feel it has a substance under it. But without going into possibilities, and taking the present average of £100 per acre profit, and cutting it in half for safety's sake, we shall obtain £50 per acre annually. In a hundred years' time it will make £5000 without considering any interest. How will the profit per acre on timber compare with it? Supposing a miracle happened, and the Forestry Department will nurse an acre of blackwood, growing on swamp land, though all those long hundred years, and then the blackwood will be ready for sale. Fifty thousand super. feet of timber per acre is probably an unattainable ideal. Let it be 50,000. As to the price, it will be very much like now. It might change relatively, but not absolutely. The present Government royalty is one shilling and sevenpence per hundred super. feet. It would make a very miserable total per acre. But in that part of the bush, where Mr. Thomas Strickland was in control, he introduced a system of selling timber by auction. It was just like taking gently a round sum of money from sawmillers' pockets and placing it into the State Treasury. That system of auction has not spread yet throughout the state, but we might expect it will in a hundred years' time, and then, with favourable market, we might make as much as £100 per

and then, with favourable market, we might make as much as £100 per acre for blackwood, after nursing it a hundred years. It is hard to estimate the cost of nursing, but nothing will be out of the way, if it amounts to the same £100. And if a miracle does not happen, and bush fire destroys the blackwood permanently, then we shall have only expenses and no profit to balance them. Personally, I regard these reservations of the rich swamp lands for growing blackwood as a sort of a sad misunderstanding. It reminds me of an injudicious spider that builds his cobwebs across a front door. In some obscure corner it would be safe and serve a useful purpose, but however useful it might be across the front door, it will be swept away sooner or later, and almost certainly rather sooner than later.

UNKNOWN TIMBERS.

One hears a number of reasonable complaints against the Forestry Department, even outside the state forest reservations. The department stands in the way of developing the country. There are good Crown lands here and there within a few chains of the existing roads, and if occasionally there are some scattered milling trees they are of no use for a sawmiller, because they would not pay for trucking. And these lands are not available for selection, because they are lumped together into big timber leases, which have their timber beds miles and miles away. It is not surprising that some regard the Forestry Department as a curse of the country. I shall express my opinion farther below. Here I want to point out that the Forestry Department could make itself tolerated, and be useful. It must renounce once and for all any claim for the rich and easily accessible lands, and shift its forest reservation to the back of the country. It must inspect at once all the private timber leases and open for selection the parts, or, at least, the most accessible parts, that have no milling timber. It must study the nature of our timbers. It is surprising how little we know on the matter. There is a booklet on our timbers written by the head of the department. He just repeats all the official superstitions concerning our timbers. For instance, he considers stringy bark for ground work, for piles and so on, as a "main desiderata." It isn't that it is bad altogether for this purpose. But there are other timbers that are far, far better. Only they are unknown to our officials. There is in this part of the country a plentiful eucalyptus tree, which we wrongly call swamp gum. I am not sure it is classified and named by our officials. I

swamp gum. I am not sure it is classified and named by our officials. I fancy it was named a couple of years ago "Marrawah gum." The curious part of it is that on our roads and railways it is not accepted either for sleepers, or posts, or for any other work. But everyone knows that it is extremely durable timber, beyond any comparison with stringy bark, durable on the surface, but its durability in the ground is almost of geological computation. If not for the space, I would give a number of examples to this effect. Is it not forestry's job to study it, and to define its qualities?

There are many other problems connected with our timbers, problems of absorbing interest. Take blackwood.

It is assumed by our officials that it grows only on good ground. The best timber bed of the best blackwood I have ever seen was on poor land. In the same time I know that most poor lands will not grow blackwood at all. Is it not an interesting problem to solve? So much for studying our native timbers. But the department could be useful in other ways. We know that our agricultural land is very patchy, and there is hardly a farm in Tasmania that has not a few acres of poor, broken, or, for some other reason, wasted land. Why is it wasted? Why is it not planted with, say, pine that would thrive there? The only reason is that the farmer does not know its value, and nobody has ever tried to explain to him, to persuade him, and to induce him. Is it not forestry's job to do it? If farmers have grasped the idea, and realised it, it would cost the State Treasury nothing. But it would add to the wealth of the state several millions. And by the way, the Forestry Department would find a market for its nursery plants.

FORESTRY POSSIBILITIES.

When one starts ruminating on the possibilities of forestry, it is easy to come to the conclusion that the Forestry Department may be both useful and necessary. And yet after all these deliberations I dare to put and answer the question. Is our forestry wanted at all? To answer it we must bear in our minds that Tasmania, just like all the other states of Australia, retains the name of a "state" only as an honorary title. They are actually nothing more than big municipalities of the sovereign state of the Commonwealth.

more than big municipalities of the sovereign state of the Commonwealth. Therefore it would be quite wrong trying to find out whether Tasmania wants forestry or not. It would mean labouring under delusion. Tasmania's wish in this respect is of no consequence. What is of paramount consequence is whether our Tasmanian forestry is wanted by the Commonwealth. And when the question takes this form, it becomes so simple that every Tasmanian will answer it—"No, the Commonwealth doesn't care twopence for our forestry, for our Tasmanian timber, she doesn't want it." It is true. Federal circles indulge occasionally in sentimental talk of national forestry. They send a man, who is supposed to know something of forestry, to Tasmania, and so on. But it is only words and sentiments. It is not enough. We live in the days of solid facts. And the solid facts tell us that with all the superiority of our timber there is no market for it in the Commonwealth. We are handling now timber that has been grown by nature, and nobody else. It does not cost us anything. The state royalty for it is quite negligible, and the timber is offered on the market actually free. Our ambition is only to be paid for milling and handling it, and we can't get it. Now, with the Forestry Department functioning, the time is coming when it will claim that our timber is grown not as much by nature as by the department, and consequently it will be more expensive. Our ambition will augment accordingly. We will want to be paid not only for milling and handling timber, but for growing it as well. Have we any reason to expect satisfaction? With all my best wishes I cannot perceive any. To think that the Federal Government, which is persistently boycotting Tasmanian timber, will one day, suddenly and unexpectedly, reform and place the Commonwealth timber market at our disposal, is just a maudlin sentimentality. We might just as well stop every work altogether and wait for a millennium that will come some day, suddenly and unexpectedly, and place us in a position to live perpetually in a pleasurable indolence.

A FEDERAL BOYCOTT.

I say that the Federal Government is boycotting our timber. I mean it, and I don't want to be misunderstood. Let those, whom it concerns, calculate what imported timber would cost, if it were produced and handled by the Australian standard of wages and shipping from the time when a tree was felled in the forest till the time when it reached our

the time when a tree was felled in the forest till the time when it reached our market as a board. Then let them impose a duty according to the difference between Australian standards and corresponding foreign. And when this is done, it will really mean not duty, it will mean only the abolition of preference on imported timber, the lifting of the boycott from our timber on our own market, in other words, the placing of the Australian article on the Australian market on the same footing as the imported one. No more. Only after that, if they care to give preference to our timber, they might impose some duty on imported. That will mean real duty.

A TOUCHY SUBJECT.

I want to say a word on duty generally. It is a touchy subject, is protective duty beneficial to the state or harmful? There are more than two diverse opinions. At my heart I am a free trader. But I am not dogmatic.

The magnitude and complexity of the present day state overawes us. Some of its functionings seem to us almost mysterious. To be able to think of it without prejudice, it is best to imagine it as a one man's estate, the man who uses the common sense in managing it. How will he regard a protective duty, say, on iron things? Well, once he can buy a cheaper and better article, than he can produce locally, he certainly will not bother about manufacturing. His iron ore is not a perishable article, and it will be just as good in another million or so years. Meantime, he will employ his available labour on producing that article which is likely to stand the world's competition, and have the best of it. Beef, wool, wheat, butter, cheese, and some other farming produce are meeting the world's competition, and they don't need any protective duty. That is his natural field of activity. And timber? Where does it stand? He will have here three considerations. If we don't use our own timber regularly, it decays in bush in a natural way, so many millions worth every year. Yet this consideration would not be decisive. With a heavy heart he would see his own wealth of timber perishing away, and buy a cheaper imported article, were it of the value equal to his own. And here comes the second consideration. The value of the imported article is far inferior. A house built of his own hardwood will last at least three times as long as a house built of imported softwood. Consequently, the real value of his article is more than three times greater than that of the imported one, while the market price of softwood is only a trifle less than hardwood. But human nature is a queer

t softwood is only a trifle less than hard-
y wood. But human nature is a queer
e thing, and one is always apt to indulge
- in buying the most expensive articles
r by buying the cheapest. In this res-
p- pect grown up people have never out-
t- grown a child's mentality. And it is
t here, that authority should intervene
e and make thoughtless, and probably,
r impecunious people use a superior home
- article for their own benefit, by impos-
e- ing an adequate duty on imported tim-
r- ber. There is a third consideration.
e If we don't use our own timber, we
r don't want any comprehensive forestry
s on scientific lines. And that concerns
s not only the timber position of the coun-
t- try. The forestry of any country is
s very closely connected with her climate
s and her agriculture, and forestry's value
e in this respect, probably, more than
1 equals its direct usefulness as a source
1 of timber.

1 It is the point of view of a free trad-
e- er. The protectionist might add to it
1 a number of his own arguments, and
s both of them might rejoin in an old
s and wise English saying that the true
- charity begins at home. Our Federal
- Government is protectionist, and yet it
- persistently boycotts our timber in pre-
3- ference to imported. There are several
7 speculations as to the reason of this
e strange anomaly, but as it stands out-
e- side any proof, it is better to leave it in
- its sad mystery. Returning again to
1 the question, if our forestry is wanted
s at all, we see in the light of all the
7 previous statements, that it might be
- very valuable. It might even become
- necessary, but the Federal Government
7 discourages it to such an extent that
1 the continuation of it would be ridicu-

lous, expensive, and useless. That the
Federal Government is flirting occa-
sionally on the subject of national for-
e- stry is only offensive in the face of
solid facts. Our Tasmanian Government
has been fooled more than once, and if
it doesn't want to be fooled this time,
let it make it clear to the Federal Gov-
e- ernment that the continuation of our
forestry, as an institution, depends en-
t- irely on the federal authorities' bene-
volence, and that this forestry will be
abolished, unless the federal authorities
give a fair chance to the timbers of our
forests on our Australian market.