COMMERCE and TRANSPORTATION

TRADE WITH WEST INDIES.

Royal Commission Continues Its Investigation at St. John, Halifax and Montreal.

"To make inquiry into the present conditions and future prospects of trade, between Canada and our West Indian Colonies, and to suggest measures for promoting closer trade relations between them, including not only the special matters referred to in the minutes of the Privy Council of Canada, but also such matters as the improvement of transportation and a cheaper and more efficient telegraph system, together with all other matters that appear to you to be best calculated to strengthen and extend commerce and communication between Canada and the West Indies."

These are the instructions given by the Imperial Government to the Royal Commission in Canada now investigating the question of trade relations between Canada and the West Indies.

After leaving Toronto the Commission travelled to St. John, N.B., and to Halifax, N.S., and thence to Montreal, taking evidence in three cities.

At the opening of the session of investigation in St. John, N.B., Mr. H. B. Schofield, a member of the Board of Trade Commission which visited the West Indies two years ago, was questioned. The chief point made by him was the necessity for a faster and better steamship service between the two countries.

Boats Delayed Eight Days.

Mr. Schofield drew attention to the fact that the West India steamers which sailed from St. John spent eight days in Halifax. A separate direct service would obviate this. At present goods shipped from St. John take about double the time of shipments from New York to the same ports. This delay would be more detrimental to outgoing than incoming traffic. In addition to this shipments were delayed at Halifax unreasonably. It had been said to him that the steamboat agents would hold back cargo which did not pay well in favor of other goods that commanded better rates. Four steamers, he said, were employed in the trade, and two of these were so old that they were unfitted for service. They were not able with the present fleet to give the steamers enough time in dry dock to keep them clean.

The chairman pointed out that with the present arrangements this would mean the transhipment of cargo at Halifax at a greatly increased cost of a faster service and asked Mr. Schofield if he thought the traffic would bear it, and he replied that he was contemplating the competition with New York, which had fast lines which could be depended on to deliver goods without delay. In reply to Mr. Fielding, Mr. Schofield said that he saw no way of avoiding the delay except by a direct service.

Mr. Fielding pointed out that Messrs. Pickford & Black claimed that they were making no money because of lack of traffic. Their contract would expire in a few months, and if anyone offered a better service they would receive careful consideration.

Trade of Halifax and St. John.

Speaking of the division of trade between Halifax and St. John, Mr. Schofield said that a large quantity of cargo was shipped to Halifax, to save delay in shipment, which would otherwise be shipped from St. John. By saving delays in shipment he thought commission houses which kept large stocks at the seaboards ready for shipment would be able to secure more of the trade. Mr. Schofield drew attention to the need for better telegraphic and postal service, Lord Balfour informed him that the Post-office Department at Ottawa had the matter in hand. The speaker in closing pointed out the necessity for a preferential tariff.

Mr. Charles Peters, of the firm of Baird and Peters, did not complain of the transportation facilities. His firm, he said, imported sugar and molasses, and the only difficulty he found was the bad condition of the goods upon arrival. The rates, he said, had been raised 25 cents per puncheon a few years ago, and now Barbados molasses was landed in Montreal 25 cents cheaper than the present transportation company now charge for bringing it to St. John. In reply to Sir Daniel Morris the witness said that his firm imported dry centrifugal Muscovado sugar. The total imports to St. John would be only about 3,000 barrels of 250 pounds each per annum.

Molasses Appetite Will Grow.

The molasses trade, the witness stated, was good and would increase with the population. It was used largely by the lumbermen and fishermen. "Fancy Barbados molasses," was the name of the brand his firm imported which is classed with molasses in the tariff under a special ruling.

The next witness was Mr. L. G. Crosby, of the Crosby Molasses Company, an importer of molasses and an exporter of shingles and lumber. He has been connected with the trade 25 years and on several occasions has visited the West Indies.

The preference, he said, affected molasses in that molasses from British West Indies is duty free, while a duty is imposed on that imported from other islands. This arrangement has resulted in giving the British islands a monopoly of the Canadian trade in this commodity.

The witness did not think that a preference on flour, oats and feed would assist in building up a large trade in these goods. The reason that the preference could not affect the lumber trade was that the United States could not compete in this line. He thought that the West Indies used at least half a million barrels of flour a year, and with a preference Canada could capture all this trade. It would be advisable that the preference should be granted only to goods shipped from Canadian ports.

In reply to Sir Daniel Morris the witness stated that he understood that the production of Muscovado molasses depended on the production of Muscovado sugar. There was a preference for this molasses in some places, Newfoundland, for instance. The people of the Maritime Provinces seemed to prefer fancy molasses.

No Competition With United States in Fish.

Mr. John Sealy, fish merchant, was next questioned. There was no competition with the United States, he said. The only fish sold in the West Indies was from Canada and the United States, although recently small shipments had been made from the east coast of England to Demerara.

He found the present service fairly satisfactory, but a better service, he thought, would stimulate the trade. Fish were perishable in the West Indies, and better shipments would alleviate this.

Regarding the short stay in St. John, Mr. Sealy said that this might be overcome if they had a dry dock there in which the steamers might be cleaned.

Mr. Fielding remarked that the statistics showed that in 1907 the West Indies imported $388,000 worth of fish from New York. This, said Mr. Sealy, was Newfoundland fish shipped in bond to New York.

The witness did not think that a preference would help his trade at all, as there was no competition with the United States. The Newfoundland fish would be entitled to the same preference. The consumption was falling off everywhere, due, he supposed, to the fact that there were so many other things to take their place. He considered it a waning industry.

In reply to Sir J. Dickson-Poynder, the witness said that he did not favor a direct service because the trade would probably not permit of a service more frequent than once a month. He would like a more frequent service and longer time to load.

Mr. J. Frank Gregory, of Messrs. Murray and Gregory, Limited, was also called.

Banking Facilities in West Indies.

When the commission opened its investigation in Halifax, N.S., Mr. William Murray, of the Bank of Nova Scotia, for many years connected with the Jamaica branch was called. He thought there would be difficulty as to banking facilities keeping pace with trade. The bank loaned to general merchants in Jamaica and financed the planters. During the busy season they have not more than one million dollars invested there. Canada, he declared, could take much of Jamaica's fruit if there were a faster service. The boats take fruit at Jamaica, and go around the Island afterwards. There has been an increase in Jamaica's trade, he said, since the building of the Panama Canal began. Halifax and New York have equal facilities for remittances.

Mr. E. L. Thorne, manager of the Union Bank, thought there was a good chance for investment in the West Indies, providing one went there and studied the situation. Preferential tariff would, in his opinion, make trade easier.