

The Commercial

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THE BEHRING SEA MATTER.

New interest has been given this important question by the recent proclamation of President Harrison, concerning the taking of fur seal in Behring Sea. Naturally this proclamation caused considerable alarm, especially to those interested in the seal fisheries of the Pacific coast. In our Pacific province of British Columbia, a good deal of attention has been given to the seal fishing industry, and considerable capital has been invested in the business. Sealing has been followed for years by a number of parties in British Columbia, and the business in connection therewith has formed quite an important item in the trade of Victoria. In the neighborhood of twenty-five schooners annually market their catch of seal skins at Victoria, and the majority of these schooners are owned and fitted out at that port. The seals are taken along the Pacific coast, but principally in Behring Sea. Last season, for instance, out of 24,790 seal skins delivered in British Columbia, 16,942 skins were taken in Behring Sea, leaving but 7,848 skins taken along the coast. These figures even do not give a fair comparison, as last season the catch was nearly one-third under that of the previous year, owing to the fact that some of the schooners did not go into Behring Sea, for fear of capture by the United States authorities. Had not this fear existed, a considerably larger number of seals would probably have been taken in Behring's Sea. It will be seen from these figures that the closing of Behring Sea means the practical destruction of the sealing industry of British Columbia.

It will be remembered that it was in the season of 1887 that several Canadian sealers were seized in Behring Sea, on the alleged claim of fishing within United States waters. During the season of 1888 no attempt was made to molest our sealers, though quite a number of them went into the sea, and it was pretty generally understood, though not officially announced, that the United States Government had decided to abandon its absurd claim of jurisdiction over the sea. The recent proclamation of President Harrison therefore caused surprise as well as alarm in some quarters. Since the seizure of the

Canadian schooners in 1887, it is understood that negotiations have been going on between the British Government and the United States, to recover damages for these seizures.

On second reading, and with a better knowledge of the facts connected therewith, the proclamation concerning the taking of seal in Behring Sea, appears to be quite a harmless document. An act passed by Congress some time ago, prohibits, under a penalty of fine, imprisonment, etc., the killing of otter, mink, martin, sable or fur seal within the limits of the territory of Alaska or the waters thereof. Vessels violating the act, may be confiscated, together with their cargoes. On March 2nd last, an act was passed by Congress, applying the first mentioned act regarding the killing of otter, mink, etc., to "all the dominion of the United States in Behring Sea." It was further provided by the act of March 2nd, that the President should issue a proclamation each year, warning all persons from entering the waters of Behring Sea, for the purpose of violating the act regarding the killing of otter, mink, seal, etc. It will thus be seen that the President has issued his proclamation in conformity with the recent act of Congress, and further that the proclamation simply warns all persons against killing the fur animals specified, within the territory of Alaska and the waters thereof, in the dominion of the United States. No reference is made in either the act or the President's proclamation, to the extent of the dominion of the United States in Alaska waters. This important point is left undefined. Of course Canadians interested in the sealing industry, cannot object to the enforcement of these acts by the United States authorities, within the dominion of the United States in Alaska and Alaskan waters. According to the well defined laws of nations, the dominion of the United States in Alaskan waters, will only extend over the waters adjacent to the coast of the main land and islands of Alaska, and over this limited area, the United States has undoubted right to exercise its authority. In discussing this question, *Bradstreet's* journal of New York says:—

The President's proclamation simply warns all persons against violating the act mentioned, and orders the arrest and punishment of all found violating the same. Neither the act nor the proclamation, however, defines the extent of "all the dominion of the United States in the waters of Behring Sea."

It is hardly probable that the United States will again put forth this absurd claim to jurisdiction over Behring Sea,

especially so soon after the virtual abandonment of the claim by the late administration under President Cleveland. If such a claim is made, it will be the duty of the British Government to firmly resist such pretensions. Behring Sea lies between Alaska and the continent of Asia. It is partially enclosed on the south by a long arm extending out from the coast of Alaska, and beyond this a chain of islands. But the most westerly island in this chain, and in possession of the United States, is 370 miles from the coast of Asia. The width of the Sea itself is over 1,000 miles. That the United States should claim jurisdiction over a sea of this size, lying between two continents, especially when its most western possession is 370 miles from the opposite continent, does seem rather ridiculous.

It may be well to note that the proclamation of President Harrison may be taken as a warning to citizens of the United States who prosecute the sealing industry. The acts of Congress prohibit the killing of seal and certain fur-bearing animals, in Alaska and adjacent waters under the jurisdiction of the United States. The Secretary of the Treasury, however, has authority to allow the killing of animals other than seal, under certain regulations. The Alaska Commercial Company has had an exclusive lease from the Government to kill seal, for some years, and citizens of the United States would be dealt with just the same as foreigners, if they undertook to violate the laws.

Whatever may be the pretensions of the United States to jurisdiction in Behring Sea, the question should be settled at once. The sealing season in the sea comes on in June, and if an understanding is not arrived at at once, our sealing industry in British Columbia may suffer, through fear of the owners to send their ships into the sea. At any rate the British Government should assure its subjects of protection, while engaged in prosecuting a lawful calling on the high seas.

RAILWAYS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA.

A great many railway schemes of various kinds are just now attracting attention in British Columbia. The enterprising Columbians do not stop at the consideration of merely local enterprises of this nature. They have a number of local railway enterprises in hand, but there are also several railway schemes of international importance, under discussion,