

BUFFALOES AND BLACKFELLOWS.

INTERVIEW WITH MR. E. O. ROBINSON.

Mr. E. O. Robinson, of Bowen Straits, Northern Territory, is staying at the Austral Club for a few days before going on Sydney. He has put in 20 years in the Northern Territory and looks none the worse for it. In fact he informed The Advertiser representative that he was in excellent health and his appearance bore the statement out. The first query was as to the condition of that "distressful country" that is going to the bad some £60,000 every year. "Well," said Mr. Robinson, "there is a lot of gold coming down country. Last year some 35,000 oz. were obtained and it is only obtained by scratching the surface; it is really a wonder where it all comes from. Most even of the mines which are owned by Europeans are let on tribute to Chinamen." I suppose you favour Tamil immigration? "No. The Chinese are far better workers than the Tamils. My idea is that Chinese should be engaged to work for two years and at the end of the time be returned to their own country. What we don't want is Chinese owners of the soil and Chinese storekeepers. If that sort of thing goes on it can only end in the Northern Territory becoming a China-man's country. That and the construction of the Transcontinental railway on the land-grant principle are what I consider would send the country ahead. It means the making of the place." In what way? "Well the mails would go that way for one thing and people who don't like the long sea voyage. It is only eight days from Singapore to Port Darwin by fast steamer. Then the railway syndicate would take the land up in alternate blocks and they would have to put people on the land to make the scheme pay." Who would they put on the land? "Europeans- Yes, I think Europeans could make a living there. This land is worth very little to the Government now, but the alternate blocks which the Government would retain would increase in value with those of the syndicate. Land always increases in value when traversed by a railway." Has the Government land along the Pine Creek railway increased in value? "No, I don't think it is. But then it does not go through good agricultural or pastoral land. It only runs to the reefs and they are only being scratched and not worked yet." The conversation then turned on Mr. Robinson's own business at Bowen Strait, near the old Imperial settlement of Port Essington. He has 4,000 square miles of country on a 42 years' lease, but it is useless for cattle, and is in fact a big buffalo run. The animals are quite wild and are chiefly valuable for their hides and horns. Mr. Robinson has sent away 20,000 hides since he began business. The buffalo is tamed throughout the East and used as a draught animal, but this has not been attempted at Bowen Straits because hitherto they have not had security of tenure. Mr. Robinson's run includes Melville Island, which is but little known and contains some 400 square miles, also Coburg Peninsula and another 1,000 square miles on the mainland. The buffalo have been running here for 60 years, ever since the first settlers at Port Essington introduced them. Mr. Robinson has about 40 natives working for him and these are looked after by six white men. These tame black fellows speak quite a different language from the wild men of Melville Island, with whom there has hitherto been no means of communication except by signs. The inland swarms with buffaloes, indeed Mr. Robinson thinks it is stocked up to its full carrying capacity. A very curious fact is that the blackfellows don't eat the buffalo, and the reason seems to be that their spears are not able to pierce his inordinately thick hide. When Mr. Robinson first settled at Bowen Straits the natives were astonished to see him eat the flesh of the animal, and it was a difficult matter to induce them to try it. Now, however, they are all rolling fat on buffalo meat. When landing on Melville Island Mr. Robinson has seen as many as 100 buffaloes grazing quietly near the shore. On near acquaintance the savages did not prove so wild as had been supposed and on their last visit the white men had no trouble with them. Hitherto not much has been done with the buffalo on Melville Island, but next season Mr. Robinson intends opening up a trade in their hides. Collecting Customs duties for the

Government is one of Mr. Robinson's functions. Every year the Malays come over in their Macassar prows to trade with the natives and fish for trepang. They have been doing this for at least the past two centuries, and it was they who first introduced smallpox to the aborigines. In the trading and fishing season they make a great shore camp, and on the rice and other provisions which they bring over they have to pay £100 or £500 Customs duty every year.

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