

In the House.

THE COMMISSION CRITICISED.

In the Debate on the Address in the House of Commons, in answer to the Speech from the Throne, the report of the South African Hospitals Commission was boldly attacked by Sir Walter Foster, Mr. Murray Guthrie, and Mr. Burdett-Coutts.

Sir W. Foster (Derbyshire, Ilkeston), according to the *Times*, drew attention to the terrible losses which he said our Army in South Africa had sustained from the ravages of preventible disease. Up to the end of last year we lost 7,500 men from disease alone; 30,200 were sent home invalided, and the death-rate among our soldiers was $37\frac{1}{2}$ per 1,000, which was six times the rate among the same class of the population in time of peace. Up to the end of September last no fewer than 3,642 deaths, or nearly half, were caused by typhoid or enteric fever of an eminently preventible character, and since September last 15,000 men had been invalided with that disease. The more he studied the report of the South African Hospitals Commission the more he was convinced of the preventibility of this disease. It was foreseen that in South Africa we should lose more men by disease than at the hands of the enemy. The troops should have been placed in positions where they would be protected from these diseases, and the Government should have sent out a commission to attend to the matter. But the War Office, acting on the opinion of the Director-General, did not think it necessary to send out any experts to consider the sanitation of camps and other places where soldiers were congregated, because they thought the Army Medical Department were competent to see to the matter. That conclusion, arrived at deliberately on November 9, 1899, was absolutely falsified by the recently issued report of the Hospitals Commission.

The death-rate for disease generally had been six times what it should be under ordinary conditions. Of typhoid fever, up to September, there had been 3,642 deaths out of 15,655 cases, and 9,128 patients had been invalided home. He would be glad to know the figures up to the end of the year, and also what steps were proposed to be taken by the Government for carrying out suggestions for preventing this lamentable loss of life from disease among our brave troops in South Africa.

There were, certainly very grave conditions in relation to hospitals and nursing. Overcrowding was admitted, and in hospitals 8 and 9 at Bloemfontein there were 1,398 and 1,600 patients, the

calculated capacity being 521. Then they had too few doctors, and too few orderlies, and the latter were not properly supervised. Some of the orderlies, moreover, had to work 36 hours out of 48. There were not sufficient nurses until the end of May. There was insufficient clothing, and insufficient hospital utensils, and the washing was improperly done. Again in No. 9 the cases were not properly distributed, and in No. 10 the latrines were not properly covered up. In another there was delay in serving patients with food, due to the fact that there was not enough boiling water to be obtained or, in other cases that there were not proper cooking utensils. There was a deficiency of blankets, and yet in the stores of Bloemfontein there were plenty of blankets. The Commissioners spoke of the lack of organization, evinced by the fact that when there were deficiencies officers did not seem to know where to apply.

But it seemed to him that there had been in this campaign a lack of consideration for the sick and wounded, and a breakdown of the arrangements, which ought not to have occurred considering the way in which the Government was backed up by the country in this war. He wished to know from the Secretary of State whether steps had been taken to remedy these defects, and whether he proposed, as far as possible during the continuance of the war, to reorganize the medical services so that such conditions might not occur again in the future.

Mr. Guthrie (Tower Hamlets), said that now that the Commission had reported, and the matter was no longer *sub judice* he wished to pass a few criticisms, not only on the action of the Government, but on the report of the Commission itself.

He remembered the surprise caused at Bloemfontein by the speeches of Sir William MacCormac and Mr. Treves at the Reform dinner in London. The former said that it would not be possible to have anything more perfect than the medical service in this war. Mr. Treves endorsed those words, and went out of his way to insult a body of women in South Africa, many of whom were doing service to their country. He did not think their patriotism was any less than that of Mr. Treves, and he had no right to belittle the services of women in South Africa who were working for love of their country, and not for £5,000 a year.

When the celebrated letter of the hon. member for Westminster was published he believed it came like a bombshell to the English people.

If he had had time he would have liked to analyse a good deal of the evidence given before the Commission. He thought he would be able

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