

Letters to the Editor re Kerosene, by Edward Gribben Wilson in 1865

Illawarra Mercury, 25 April 1865

Kerosene.

(To the Editor of the Illawarra Mercury)

Sir,-I have observed that during the last few weeks you have from time to time drawn the attention of your readers to the circumstance of the shale existing, or perhaps it may be said discovered, in your neighbourhood being applicable to the manufacture of kerosene oil, and from that fact you anticipated a wonderful amount of prosperity to your district but, as it is evident that a very great amount of misapprehension exists in reference to the matter (taking what has been advanced on the subject in your paper as a specimen) it seems a charitable act for somebody to undertake the thankless office of just "insinnewatting" the unwelcome idea that perhaps there may be some error in the calculations upon which the glowing visions of future riches are based.

Now, this I venture to do, notwithstanding that it is a great pity to disturb the pleasing hallucination indulged in by the writer, who anticipates with satisfaction the "good time coming" when "people become acquainted with the process," indicating the idea of a kind of local Millenium for the lucky Wollongongites, when, as an auxiliary operation to milking his cows, he will, each man under his own vine and fig tree, manufacture the light diffusing fluid, and in consequence, grow rich and happy. Strange that the opposite of this pleasing picture should be first to present itself to my mind as the result of those attempts, and that I should rather expect to hear of "fires," "explosions," and "coroner's inquests," and of the unfortunate Wollongongite wending his way to King street to cultivate the acquaintance of Mr McFarlane, at the same time uttering expressions the reverse of complimentary respecting the "Illawarra Mercury" for leading him astray. I assure you, Sir, that to those really acquainted with the matter the whole affair is taken out of the list of serious subjects and becomes like a "good joke," when somebody says the "operation is simple," the "machinery inexpensive," and the labour light, implying that, of course, nothing is required but take this tide at its flood and go on to fortune. Pity that facts, which are stubborn things, should be directly opposed to each of these assertions - first as to the "simple operation," I very much mistake if a twelve months' apprenticeship of the cleverest man you have got will make him fully master of all the details of this "simple operation;" and, as to the idea of its becoming a domestic manufacture it is "simply absurd," from the dangerous and explosive nature of the ingredients to be employed as well as the expensive plant absolutely necessary to carry on the business advantageously. As to the machinery being "inexpensive" that is altogether a matter relative to the wealth of the parties engaged. Thus you may have merchant princes in Wollongong who would look upon the outlay of a few thousands (and that would be required) as a small and inexpensive matter; whilst to others of less wealth "little things being great to little men," the outlay necessary would be an effectual preventative from their engaging in the business. Then, as to the other recommendation of the labour being "light" some will take care to make any labour light but this is one requiring constant attention, night and day. Your calculations as to profit are misleading and based upon promises altogether unsound; and permit me to say that, whilst many of the first comers in the trade in question were very successful, many have since found, to their sorrow, that it is a business in which money may be lost, as well as gained; and, I have reliable information to the effect that the number of the losers are very large indeed, and I am also sure that if the trade be entered upon based upon such calculations as have appeared in your paper, that the number of the losers will be increased. Then, as to the yield of finished oil, I am satisfied (without for a moment setting myself up as an authority in opposition to Mr. Watt) that the proportion of 25 to 32 will not be obtained. I have tried it, and "sage experience bids me this declare," that I think it a risk to say that you will obtain 40 gallons to the ton, (assuming the

amount of crude oil to be correct); and then, again, your calculation of 3s per gallon is too high, as, when the manufacture of oil is commenced here, I do not think it likely it will ever exceed 2s 6d per gallon wholesale; and the probability is that the merchants and importers of American oil (who will be dead against you) will not relinquish the trade till they have run you to a figure at which it will be impossible to pay. You would, by this reduction in quantity and price reduce your £7 10s to £5 to begin with; then you have the expense of all acids and materials, and wood and tin cases, besides the "light" labor which you may depend, will not look remarkably light on pay day, as well as the whole of the incidental expenses inseparable to such a business, so that if no better raw material turns up than what has come to Mr. Graham, I am of opinion that when you come to reckon up your profits, you will find that you have "gained a loss." The writer has, to his cost, been engaged in experiments upon this simple operation for the last twelve months, and claims the empty honor of being the first to practically prove that kerosene oil can be made in the colony from material found within itself, and it was in consequence of a casual remark made to him by Mr Speer, that, in company with Mr. Vennard, he paid a visit of inspection to your district, resulting in the discovery the importance of which has been so much overrated, and it may save you some trouble if I undertake to supply you from Sydney with crude oil at a cheaper rate than you can manufacture it, supposing you have no better material to work upon than what has already come to hand. Nothing can be gained in the end by indulging in expectations which it is impossible to realise, and I would therefore recommend you to take the advice of some competent and respectable person (say Mr. Watt), pay him for his trouble, and let him supply you with an estimate of the outlay required and the returns to be expected, then you will have some reasonable data to go upon.

I conclude by hoping that when the anticipated harvest of wealth is gathered in, you will favourably remember the writer, who was first to bring the matter into notice, imagines he has some claim to consideration.

I am, Sir,

Yours, respectfully,

EDWARD G. WILSON.

601, Brickfield Hill, April 19th, 1865.

[It is impossible to read the above letter without the conviction that Mr, Wilson is afraid he will not come in for his share of the loaves and fishes, nor can we think that Mr. Wilson is a believer in what he says, for if those who have speculated in kerosene mineral lands, are to visit King-street, should they be fortunate enough to escape being the subject of a coroner's inquest, how can he feel that he has a claim to consideration as the first to bring the kerosene mineral into notice. Until further experiments shall prove that we are wrong, we shall be content to believe that Mr. Watts' analyses is correct, and that the mineral contains 20 percent of pure oil. Should such be the case, and the manufacture of the oil be carefully conducted, we have no doubt but that there will be a valuable product added to our exports, and a fair profit attained American merchants and importers notwithstanding.— ED. I.M.]

The Sydney Morning Herald, 3 May 1865

KEROSENE.

To the Editor at the Herald

Sir,-As the manufacture of kerosene at present occupies some share of public attention, and you state that "many inquiries are made on the subject," I beg to say that I can, probably better than any other person, supply information on the matter. It is now above twelve months since I began to try experiments in the manufacture of burning oil, my idea being to use for that purpose the tar sold at a cheap rate at the gas-works; but, finding that unsuitable for the purpose, and not wishing to give the matter up, I tried to find some substance from which to distil it direct. I was advised earnestly to proceed with the attempt; and an opinion was given that a substance found in a neighbourhood to which I was directed, would be suitable for the purpose. This, however, was not the case; but knowing that there was a peculiar kind of coal or shale found in the neighbourhood of Hartley, in July last year I applied to the Rev. W. B. Clarke for his opinion, and a specimen of it. As to the first, he pointed out in one of his works that, years ago, he had stated that the shale referred to would make a good illuminating oil, he also very kindly searched for a specimen; but, being unable to find any, gave me a note to Mr. Krefft at the Museum, requesting that gentleman to look me up some, but Mr. Krefft was also unable to find any; and on my informing Mr. Clarke, the reverend gentleman expressed his regret, but stated that he would procure me some direct from Hartley. Accordingly a few days afterwards I received a note by post from the reverend gentleman, dated August 17th, 1864, stating that he had applied to Mr. Brown, who had promised to send him some, which he would forward to me on arrival. Some time elapsing, I applied to Mr. George Jarvis, of Hartley, who at once undertook to procure a quantity for me; and on the 18th of December, I received 5 cwt. per rail from Penrith. I had from time to time in the course of my experiments consulted Mr. C. Watt, at the Gas Works, and on the arrival of the shale took him a sample, and, relying on his honour, made no secret from him as to whence I had procured it. He expressed his strong approval of the shale, and his opinion that if it were to be procured in quantity it might be a good thing. I made further inquiries as to quantity, and whether the land was procurable, and found that there was a probability of the shale being in quantity, and that the owner of the farm where it was procured was not only willing but anxious to sell. A few weeks afterwards I went up to purchase, when lo, the farm had already been sold to some gentleman, who in his great anxiety to secure it gave more than double the amount it had been offered for a few weeks previous. With the sudden advance the district in question has since made - the "gold" and the "coal," and the "kerosene" - the public are already familiar.

Meantime should we see the trade in the last-named article become of the magnitude we are led to suppose it will, I would suggest that the classic ground of Brickfield-hill as being able to establish a just claim to being its birthplace, would bear with honour the title of "Petrolia," and would therefore recommend the baptism of any other place by that name to be deferred.

I remain, Sir, yours &c.,

EDWARD G. WILSON.

601, Brickfield-hill, May 2nd, 1865.

P.S.-The process of manufacture above referred to might have been seen at the above address any day during the past four months.

The Sydney Morning Herald, 5 May 1865

KEROSENE

To the Editor of the Herald.

Sir,—In this day's issue you publish a letter signed E. G. Wilson, will you kindly insert the following reply, and the enclosed letter?

The author of that letter did not inform me, in confidence or otherwise, of the locality in which the mineral to which he alludes was found. The substance was shown to me in the presence of Mr. E. D. Nicolle, the engineer, about seven years ago, and I then gave the same opinion respecting it which I have done recently.

Yours obediently,

CHARLES WATT.

Sydney, May 3rd, 1865.

My dear Sir,—My attention having been called to a letter signed "Edward G. Wilson," in this morning's Herald, from which he desires it to be inferred that you had been guilty of some breach of confidence — as the purchaser of the land referred to — I beg to give such an inference a positive denial.

The existence of the mineral alluded to has been known to me for years; and it was at my suggestion that Mr. Thomas Brown, P. M. of Hartley, was invited by the Exhibition Commissioners of 1862 to forward specimens of this as well as any other minerals he might be able to procure in the district, and he did so.

The Rev. Mr. Clarke, in his Report in the New South Wales Catalogue of the Exhibition of 1862, mentions the fact that this very coal might be "valuable as a source for the manufacture of mineral oil." I can only state that the information I had of the locality did not come from you, but from gentlemen resident in the neighbourhood, and of which Mr. Wilson was made fully acquainted by me.

I am, my dear Sir, yours very truly,

SAUL SAMUEL

Mr. Charles Watt, Sydney.