

*But What Warrant Have We to Take That Land? (1629)*

John Winthrop

As John Winthrop wrestled with the question of whether to join the proposed colony of Massachusetts Bay, he committed his thoughts to paper, circulating them among his associates. These statements, which exist in several versions, are remarkable expositions of both the motives impelling Puritans to leave their homeland and the purposes to which they wished to put what they termed the American wilderness. Winthrop's response to this objection sets forth, with standard Puritan logic, the dominant view of the English toward the native inhabitants.

Question: But what warrant have we to take that land, which hath been of long tyme possessed of others the sons of Adam ?

Answer: That which is common to all is proper to none. This savage people ruleth over many lands without title or property; for they enclose no ground, neither have they cattle to maintayne it, but remove their dwellings as they have occasion, or as they can prevail against their neighbors. And why may not Christians have liberty to go and live amongst them in their wastelands and woods (leaving them such places as they have manured for their corne) as lawfully as Abraham did among the Sodomites? For God hath given to the sons of men a twofold right to the earth; there is a natural right a civil right. The first right was natural when men held the earth in common, every man sowing and feeding where he pleased: Then, as men and cattle increased, they appropriated some parcels of ground by enclosing and peculiar manurance, and this in tyme got them a civil right. Such was the right which Ephron and Hittite had to the field of Machpelah, wherein Abraham could not bury a dead corpse without leave, though for the out parts of the country which lay common, he dewlt upon them and tooke the fruite of them as his pleasure. This appears also in Jacob and his sons, who fed their flocks as boldly in the Canaanites land, for he is said to be Lord of the country; and at Dodham and all other places men accounted nothing their own, but that which they had appropriated by their own industry, as appears plainly by Abimelech's servants, who in their own country did often contend with Isaac's servants about wells which they had digged; but never about the lands which they occupied. So likewise between Jacob and Laban; he would not take a kid of Laban's without special contract; but he makes no bargain with him for the land where he fed. And it is probable that if the country had not been as free for Jacob as for Laban, that covetuous wretch would have made his advantage of him, and have upbraided Jacob with it as he did with the rest. Secondly, There is more than enough for them and us. Thirdly, God hath consume the natives with a miraculous plague, whereby the greater part of the country is left voide of its inhabitants. Fourthly, We shall come in good leave of the natives.