
John Winthrop Defends the Right of Puritans to Settle on Indian Land England, 1629

John Winthrop (1588–1649), lawyer and leader of the 1630 migration of English Puritans to Massachusetts Bay Colony, penned a brief document in 1629 that answered several objections to the project. In the passage below, he drew on the Bible to justify settling land that was already occupied by other “sons of Adam.” Earlier in the text, he had asserted that “The whole earth is the Lord’s garden and he hath given it to the sons of Adam to be tilled and improved by them.” The argument below reflects this understanding of the proper relationship between humans and the land. Non-standard spellings have been modernized. —D. Voelker

[Question.] What warrant have we to take that land, which is and hath been of long time possessed of others the sons of Adam?

Ans[wer]. 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 maintain 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 dwell amongst them in their wastelands and woods (leaving them such places as they have manured for their corn) 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 and 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 time got them a civil right. Such was the right which Ephron the 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 [Abraham] dwelt upon them and took the fruit of them at his pleasure. This appears also in Jacob and his sons, who fed their flocks as boldly in the Canaanites’ land, for he [Jacob] is said to be lord of the country; and at Dotham and all other places [where] men accounted nothing their own, but that which they had appropriated by their own industry

2dly, There is more than enough for them and us.

3dly, God hath consumed the natives with a miraculous plague, whereby the greater part of the country is left void of inhabitants.

4thly, We shall come in with good leave of the natives.

(continued)

Discussion Questions:

1. How did Winthrop's understanding of property help him make his case? What distinction did he draw between a "natural right" and a "civil right"?
2. What other kinds of evidence did Winthrop use to argue that the Puritans could rightfully settle land in America?
3. What role did Christianity play in this argument?
4. Why were Native Americans at a disadvantage when it came to protecting their land from invasion?

SOURCE: John Winthrop, "General Considerations for the Plantations in New England, with an Answer to Several Objections," *Winthrop Papers*, vol. II (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1931), p. 120.



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