

New York, August 31, 1886.

My Dear Mr. Sanborn:

I am sorry to say that it will be impossible for me to be at Saratoga next week, much as I should like to be there; nor do I think I can throw much light on the question, the right of property in land. It seems to me very clear that labor is the foundation of all property, and that the ultimate right of ownership of land is in the community. But it is equally clear, from history, that the communal ownership and management never has promoted public welfare. The community have a right of control over land which they have not over personal property, which is itself the product of industry; but they have a perfect right to exercise that control by allowing private ownership within such limitations as they see fit to attach. And such private ownership, on the whole, serves the public welfare much better than public ownership, if that be coupled with public administration. Not only is this true, but much of our legislation assumes this to be true. The Irish land legislation of Gladstone can be defended on no other basis. Practically, the question for us in America to determine, is, What limitations should the public put upon private ownership in land in order to secure the largest public welfare? I have never been satisfied that Henry George is right in thinking it wise to put the entire burden of taxation on land. However, I have no doubt of the abstract right of the community to do this if this is proved to be for the common welfare. On the other hand, it seems clear that some system should be devised and put into operation which would prevent the holding of great tracts of land, unimproved, for speculative purposes, and perhaps, also, to prevent the concentration of land in the hands of a small party of landed proprietors.

At all events, my five minutes' speech would have in it only two points, and perhaps two points are twice too many for a five minutes' speech. First, that the ownership of land belongs to the public; and, secondly, that in the administration of that ownership for the public welfare, it is desirable not to take possession of and administrate the land, but only to put limitations upon the administration of it by the individual.

Yours, Very Truly,

LYMAN ABBOTT.

Mr. F. B. Sanborn, Concord, Mass.