



The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience

Alan E. Johnson

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Roger Williams, a deeply religious minister in seventeenth-century New England, revolutionized thinking about the role government should play in religion. Banished from Massachusetts for his controversial views, he founded the Town of Providence on the basis of full liberty of conscience and total separation of church and state. These radical ideas were adopted by the Colony of Providence Plantations, which later became known as the Colony and then State of Rhode Island. Williams also insisted, contrary to the prevailing orthodoxy, that Europeans could acquire American land only through voluntary transactions with Native Americans.

This is the story of the dramatic life, thought, and work of a man who refused to accept the conventional wisdom of his time and who forged a new way of thinking that came to characterize the best in the American tradition. Born and raised in England, Williams knew or otherwise personally encountered--during his youth or in later return visits--some of the greatest figures of English history: Sir Edward Coke, Sir Francis Bacon, King James I, the young man who became King Charles I, John Milton, Oliver Cromwell. In contrast to such famous contemporaries, Williams persistently argued, publicly and unambiguously, for complete liberty of conscience and a wall of separation between church and state--both for America and for Europe. At a time when most of the governments in Europe and America promulgated some form of established religion that persecuted religious dissenters, Williams founded a polity that was explicitly based on the principles and values of what became, more than 150 years later, the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The First American Founder traces, often in Roger Williams's own colorful words, the conflicts that Williams and his settlement experienced in maintaining a haven for persecuted religious minorities. Those challenges came both in the form of military and political imperialism from other colonies and from internal dissension. The book explains how Williams faced these issues and managed to create and preserve a political society whose principles we could recognize today. It also discusses how Williams influenced, directly and indirectly, the generation that later fought the Revolutionary War and established the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

This work is written for both the general reader and the professional historian. The main text is readable by all. The endnotes and appendices contain scholarly documentation and discussion that will satisfy the most meticulous student of history.

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