
This slender volume, an elegant addition to Oxford University Press’s Lives and Legacies series, highlights one of America’s most neglected inventors—Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island. Credit for the invention of religious freedom in America must be divided among scores of individuals, but few are less understood than Williams. Prickly and combative—one rhetorical opponent judged him “overheated” (17)—Williams was estranged from all the major spiritual traditions of his day. Yet, the same man was also a skilled colonial leader and friend of leading figures of his day on both sides of the Atlantic. Edwin S. Gaustad here reprises a previous biography of Williams titled Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America. As in the earlier work, Gaustad captures the seeming contradictions of Roger Williams’s character and temperament in a way that makes Williams leap off the page into the laps of twenty-first century readers.

Some readers may find themselves as annoyed with Williams as the Massachusetts Puritans were. To be sure, his insistence that the Puritans should have paid Native Americans for the land they purportedly received by charter from Charles I would find a more receptive hearing in the present day than in the 1630s, when Williams initially pressed the point. But on other matters, Roger Williams may seem as odd today as he was in the seventeenth century. He argued, for example, that ministers should not receive salaries from the churches they served, encapsulating the essence of his position in a book titled A Hireling Ministry None of Christs. And he contended that true churches themselves were extinct, driven out of existence the moment Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire and thus corrupted the line of apostolic succession. The true church would not be resurrected until the end of time, when Christ sent new apostles to the earth with the power to establish authentic churches.

These theological positions will interest readers less than his unrelenting advocacy of religious liberty. Here Gaustad is successful in portraying how Williams’s faith nurtured his commitment to religious freedom. This commitment, more than any of his other ideas, frightened

2. Roger Williams, A Hireling Ministry None of Christs (London 1652).
Williams’s Puritan contemporaries. Years after his death, the Puritan minister and historian Cotton Mather still characterized Roger Williams as a windmill whose revolutions threatened to set America on fire. (89) Most of Williams’s contemporaries simply could not imagine a society lacking the foundation of shared religious beliefs. His insistence that such a society was not only possible but required by no less an authority than the Bible struck New England Puritans as simply mad. Time has vindicated Williams, but even today many readers may find difficulty accepting his central tenet: that those who care most deeply about religious purity and truth are those who should embrace religious freedom most enthusiastically.

Gaustad’s treatment of Roger Williams confounds more than a few modern stereotypes about the nature of religious toleration. For example, contemporary readers sometimes imagine that religious toleration requires that one “respect” beliefs different from one’s own. Judged by this standard, Roger Williams is the enemy of toleration, because he judged most of the religious beliefs of his contemporaries to be wrong, and sometimes dangerous. He was almost wholly lacking in an ecumenical temper. Gaustad describes Williams’s rhetorical contests with Quakers late in life, a contest that yielded one of Williams’s colorfully titled books—George Fox Digg’d out of his Burrowes.3 For some, the harsh judgments Williams meted out against the Quakers was a sign of intolerance. But Gaustad knows better. Williams did not “fine, jail, whip, or hang any Quakers, or permit others to do so.” (107-108) A dedication to religious liberty does not require one to adopt a posture of indifference toward religion. In fact, any toleration flowing from indifference is a weak and pale substitute for the more vigorous toleration practiced by Williams.

Gaustad’s biography accomplishes a good deal in a short space of time. It intelligibly summarizes the main events of Williams’s life, offering readers the explanations necessary to understand the significance of various occurrences. Thus, we encounter Williams the “restless Puritan,” the sympathetic observer of Native-American culture, the founder of Rhode Island, the religious Seeker, and the advocate of religious liberty. The author has a knack for selecting from among details that might have furnished a more sizeable biography to illustrate the essential character of Roger Williams. He pays particular attention to Williams’s sympathetic dealings with Native Americans, and recounts how his frequent role as a negotiator between colonists and Native

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3. Roger Williams, George Fox Digg’d out of his Burrowes (John Foster 1675).
Americans included surrendering himself as a hostage at one point to assure the safe return of a Native American leader. (42-43) Of Williams, the father, moreover, we learn how he worried over his daughter Mary’s frequent headaches and solicited a recommendation from John Winthrop for a good Boston doctor. (108) The book also presents an accurate account of Williams’s chief ideas—no small feat for someone whose collected works span seven volumes, not counting two sizeable volumes of surviving correspondence. And finally, Gaustad’s biography includes a useful reading after each chapter, drawn variously from Roger Williams’s writings or from other sources which illuminate his life and thought.

The book concludes with a whirlwind tour of American history, focused on the development of religious liberty. The connection between Williams and this development is not always tightly explained, and Gaustad sometimes makes Williams appear to be the father of events over which he probably exerted no influence. But the author’s main point is abundantly demonstrated: Williams championed the world that twenty-first century Americans have inherited with respect to religious freedom. He believed—rightly, we must now acknowledge—that it was possible to construct civil government without reliance upon the foundation of religious uniformity. It was possible also to imagine a state not hallowed by an official church and churches not propped up by the support of a benevolent government.

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