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## ROGER WILLIAMS AMONG THE NARRAGANSETT INDIANS

JACK L. DAVIS

PERHAPS no dissenter out of the American past enjoys greater prestige today than Roger Williams. He continues to fascinate students of American civilization because he was not only a devastating critic of New England theocracy, but also an original theorist who, in Parrington's words, "anticipated a surprising number of the idealisms of the future."<sup>1</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that Roger Williams' contributions to the American tradition have been explored in such standard histories as those by Tyler<sup>2</sup> and Parrington, and more recently in critical biographies by Perry Miller<sup>3</sup> and Ola Winslow.<sup>4</sup> However no study of Roger Williams has yet presented an account of his developing thought during those seminal years in New England, between his arrival in 1631 and his temporary departure to England in 1643, when he fully formulated the notable social philosophy whose fullest exposition is contained in *The Bloody Tenet* (London, 1645).<sup>5</sup>

We have but two sources for tracing Williams' thinking during this period: his letters, which primarily concern his attempts to pacify colonists and Indians, and his guide to the language of the local Narragansett Indians, *A Key Into the Language of America* (London, 1643).<sup>6</sup> Williams' letters are indeed disappointing, for they reveal little of his intellectual development; but *A Key* represents quite a different case. In fact, it reveals that those early years in New England, especially

<sup>1</sup> Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1963), I, 62.

<sup>2</sup> Moses Coit Tyler, *A History of American Literature* (New York, 1878).

<sup>3</sup> Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (New York, 1953).

<sup>4</sup> Ola Winslow, *Master Roger Williams: A Biography* (New York, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> Roger Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, Perry Miller, editor (New York, 1963), III.

<sup>6</sup> *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, I. Hereafter page numbers in the text refer to volume I, unless another volume is indicated.

the time he spent among the Narragansett Indians, were crucial in giving Roger Williams a vantage point from which he could criticize the failures of New England theocracy and develop his own conception of a superior commonwealth, one which would allow the native Indians and the colonial newcomers to coexist peacefully.

In coming to New England in the early seventeenth century, Williams had the singular opportunity to witness and understand the confrontation between two such oppositional cultures as the newly founded theocratic commonwealth of Massachusetts and the native Narragansett society. And as *A Key* discloses, Williams, who very early became intimately acquainted with Narragansett culture, discovered in it an indispensable referent culture which was in many respects equal, but opposite, to that of Puritan New England. Much as Thoreau was to do two centuries later,<sup>7</sup> Williams found in the polarity of Indian and white value systems a useful structure for criticizing the deficiencies of white culture and for defining a better one.

If this hypothesis is correct, it helps explain not only the significance of Williams' lifelong preoccupation with the American Indian,<sup>8</sup> but it also demonstrates how his experiences with them gave him a point of departure for his Veblen-esque critique of New England theocracy. It is unfortunate that this chapter in Williams' life has been neglected, because Williams has thus gone unnoticed as the first important American thinker who incorporated values from native Indian traditions into his social criticism and philosophy. Earlier studies have been content to trace the sources of Williams' thought to the revolutionary ideas of the Reformation and the radical teachings of Christ. There can be no doubt that these are the basic materials from which Williams worked; but as an analysis of *A Key* will show, they were an insufficient basis for Wil-

<sup>7</sup> Edwin Fussel, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (Princeton, 1965), 214.

<sup>8</sup> A survey of Williams' collected letters indicates that the majority relate to his concerns about Indian affairs.

liams' comprehensive social theory because they were not fully incorporated into European culture. But in Narragansett society, Williams discovered a coherent culture which not only included many elements of his social thinking but which also verified their workability. One is tempted to add that without the referent of Narragansett culture, Williams' trenchant critique of New England theocracy might have been comparatively trifling and dogmatic, for he would not have been able to present a vision of a higher commonwealth.

An examination of *A Key* will reveal how Williams' experiences among the Narragansetts helped shape his dissent and his theories about the nature of a worthy commonwealth. Both aspects of his thought are actually but two sides of the same coin. Williams offered his colonial and English readers *A Key* ostensibly as a grammar for understanding the difficult language of the Narragansett Indians. But, as Williams observes in the preface, "A little key may open a box, where lies a bunch of keys" (p. 80). And, indeed, the volume offers numerous keys into some interesting speculations about human societies; besides being simply a grammar, *A Key* is a forum for presenting Williams' observations on many aspects of Narragansett society. The framework of this ostensible grammar is organized around the opposition of Indian cultural patterns to those of European civilization. Within this structure of contrasting cultural values, Williams' ultimate frame of reference is the basic teachings of Christ: the brotherhood of mankind, the common fatherhood of God, and the spirit of unselfish love.

*A Key* is divided into thirty-two chapters, each treating an aspect of Narragansett culture. In each chapter, Williams first presents a series of Indian words and phrases on a given topic such as governmental organization, then observes how the Indian conception differs from the European. Each chapter ends with a verse particularizing the contrasting values of these two cultures. Almost invariably European civilization is discredited, especially as it is represented by the Massachusetts theocracy. Williams' favorite rhetorical technique is to invert the common assumption of white superiority by pointing out that

although Indians appear to lack civilization and Christianity, in actuality their culture is imbued with more civility and Christ-like spirit than European civilization.

The first characteristic that struck Williams forcibly about Narragansett culture was the general spirit of harmony and humanity pervading personal relationships. He was quite taken by their expansive hospitality, which extended to friends and strangers alike. He observed that: "They are remarkably free and courteous to invite all strangers in" (p. 96).<sup>9</sup> To Williams such a spirit seemed directly opposite to that shown by his own countrymen who had recently banished him from Massachusetts for differences of opinion. Later he remarked cryptically that: "It is a strange truth that a man shall generally find more free entertainment and refreshing among these barbarians than among thousands who call themselves Christians" (p. 106). Here the inversion between heathen and nominal Christian values is completed, for Williams suggests that most Christians have less of the true spirit of Christ than heathens. These observations foreshadow Williams' later view that combining church and state would not guarantee spiritualization of the state: the opposite was more likely. Conversely, he could see that a secular commonwealth did not imply, as Massachusetts magistrates were fond of arguing, that human relationships would degenerate. Rather, Narragansett culture amply demonstrated to Williams the viability of a secular society. Thus, we later find Williams theorizing in the preface to *The Bloody Tenet* that: "true civility and Christianity may both flourish in a state or kingdom notwithstanding the permission of divers and contrary consciences."<sup>10</sup> This statement, a shocking one for colonial New England, lays the foundation for freedom of religion which is a basic element in Williams' concept of an ideal commonwealth.

Williams also found much to respect in the Narragansett attitude toward wealth and material possessions. In their villages

<sup>9</sup> I have modernized Williams' spelling, punctuation and capitalization throughout this paper.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, III, 4.

no Indian was poor, neither was any anxious to be rich. As he notes: "There are no beggars amongst them, no fatherless children unprovided for" (p. 118). These observations led Williams to contrast the Indian's nonmaterialism to the materialism of his own culture:

Coarse bread and water's most their fare,  
O England's diet fine:  
Thy cup runs o'r with plenteous store  
Of wholesome beer and wine.

Sometimes God gives them fish or flesh,  
Yet they're content without,  
And what comes in, they put to friends  
And strangers round about. (p. 106)

Williams discovered here in Narragansett culture ample evidence that a commonwealth could function without greed for material things, but with the spirit of having things in common, much as did the early Christians. And, of course, Williams did not miss this opportunity to undercut the growing materialism of the Puritan commonwealth, especially its apparently insatiable appetite for more Indian land.

Indian property rights were an early concern of Williams who, unlike most colonists, assumed the Indians possessed rights to their ancestral lands. Soon after his arrival in New England, he vigorously attacked the validity of land charters granted the colonists by the King of England, arguing the King could hardly give away land which did not really belong to him.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Williams pressed his attack on colonial charters so strenuously that it became a prime reason for his banishment.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it is no surprise that in *A Key* we find him interested in examining the Narragansett notion of land ownership, especially their concept of releasing property rights. Williams observed: "The natives are very exact and punctual in the bounds of their lands, belonging to this or that

<sup>11</sup> Tyler, 244.

<sup>12</sup> Cyclone Covey, *The Gentle Radical: A Biography of Roger Williams* (New York, 1966), 94.

prince or people (even to a river, brook) etc. And I have known them to make bargain or sale among themselves for a small piece, or quantity of ground: notwithstanding a sinful opinion amongst many [white people] that Christians have the right to heathens' lands" (p. 180). Williams also found that although the Indians would release land to each other, they sold land to whites with great reluctance, transferring the rights of use but not of exclusive ownership. Few whites understood this distinction, but Williams probably did. When he came to purchase Providence from Canonicus, who was by then his fast friend, Williams acknowledged that no amount of money could have persuaded the sachem to relinquish the land. As Williams said several times: "It was not price nor money that could have purchased Rhode Island. Rhode Island was purchased by love." Since Williams had little money and Canonicus wanted none, the land was conferred as a gift, although Williams did give some "gratuities" in appreciation. Furthermore, it seems likely that Williams did understand, as Covey has observed, that: "from Canonicus's point of view, the treaty of 'purchase' did not bestow ownership but only the right to settle on the sachem's land as his subjects."<sup>13</sup> This unusual concept was soon put into practice by Williams, who distributed the gift land equally to his fellow settlers. As Winslow has already noted in her extensive examination of Williams' land dealings: "[Williams] was buying it individually, and then assigning portions to them equally to use, not to own."<sup>14</sup> Additionally, it is significant that Williams set aside some land to be held in common for the use of future settlers who came to the colony penniless.

Unfortunately for Williams, some colonists would not accept this idea of ownership, and many legal battles ensued until Williams finally relented and deeded the land, including the communal acreage, over to private individuals. His fellow colonists were apparently not ready to have this aspect of Wil-

<sup>13</sup> Covey, 132.

<sup>14</sup> Winslow, 134.

liams' ideal commonwealth instituted. Notwithstanding this unsatisfactory experience, Williams remained steadfast in his belief that the Indian communal concept was better.<sup>15</sup> And he became bitterly disappointed by the insatiable appetite of the colonists for more and more Indian land. As he observed in a letter to Winthrop, the "God Land will be (as now it is) as great a God with us English as God Gold was with the Spaniards" (VI, 319).

The Narragansett governmental structure probably occasioned the greatest surprise to Williams because it was monarchical in form, but democratic in operation. Astonishingly, this apparently contradictory arrangement seemed satisfactory to the natives. Williams noted: "The sachems, although they have an absolute monarchy over the people; yet they will not conclude of aught that concerns all, either laws or subsidies, or wars, unto which the people are averse, and by gentle persuasion cannot be brought" (p. 224). Here Williams could not help perceiving that the Indian government was more democratic in operation than that of the Massachusetts colony. He also discovered that, contrary to the fear of New England magistrates, this practicing democracy did not produce a morally corrupt society. Instead, Williams observed of the Narragansetts: "I could never discern that excess of scandalous sins amongst them, which Europe aboundeth with. Drunkenness and gluttony, generally they know not what sins they be;

<sup>15</sup> The precise nature of Narragansett concepts of property ownership and Williams' own relationship to them has not yet been settled satisfactorily. For example, Alden T. Vaughan in *New England Frontier* (Boston, 1965) makes no distinction between the rights of use as opposed to outright ownership in Indian land transactions. Vaughan also argues that "Williams and the other Puritans differed very little in their attitudes or their actions towards the natives of New England" (119). However, William N. Fenton argues in *American Indian and White Relations to 1830* (Chapel Hill, 1957) the basic view of these Indians was "that land could be neither bartered nor sold!" (17). My own view is that the consensus of scholarship on Indian concepts of property rights supports Fenton and the interpretations of Williams given by Covey and Winslow. Surely Vaughan is far from correct to claim Williams' attitudes towards the Indians were substantially like those of his fellow colonists. The most cursory reading of *A Key* indicates otherwise. As Perry Miller has said, Williams was perhaps the only Englishman who could and did treat Indian culture with respect.

and although they have not so much to restrain them (both in respect of knowledge of God and laws of men) as the English have, yet a man shall never hear of such crimes among them of robberies, murders, adulteries, etc. as amongst the English" (p. 225). Thus, Williams discounted the prevalent notion that a combined church and state government would necessarily produce more social justice and morality than a secular, democratic one.

The Indian principle of government through consensus achieved by persuasion was also attractive to Williams, who later included it in his precept that "The sovereign power of all civil authority is founded in the consent of the people."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, from his experience with the Narragansetts, Williams recognized that the best form of government should be determined by its usefulness to a given culture, as the Narragansetts had demonstrated in successfully combining elements of monarchy and democracy. In *The Bloody Tenet*, he speculates that the best government is not necessarily democratic in form, although it should be in spirit: "A people may erect and establish what form of government seems to them most meet for their civil condition."<sup>17</sup>

This spacious view of government is no doubt directly attributable to the cultural relativism Williams developed from his understanding of Indian social institutions.

Predictably, it was Narragansett religion which evoked Williams' most sustained attention. Although it was also the institution he could least assimilate into his theories, it had features he respected. Because Williams came to America with the avowed desire of converting Indians to Christianity, he found it difficult to comment objectively about Narragansett religion; his observations contain many conflicting elements and lack a consistent point of view. Nonetheless, he points out that some basic Indian beliefs corroborated his own: "He that questions whether God made the world, the Indian will teach him. I must acknowledge I have received in my converse with

<sup>16</sup> Williams, III, 214.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, III, 249.

them many confirmations of those two great points, Heb. 11.6 viz. (1) That God is. (2) That he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him" (p. 207). In fact, Williams became increasingly persuaded that respect for spiritual things was more characteristic of Indian than English culture. Consequently, he again faults his countrymen—this time because they failed to live up to their higher revelation of religion. He suggests that God may well judge the Indians more favorably than the English:

Boast not proud English of thy birth and blood,  
 Thy brother Indian is by birth as good.  
 Of one blood God made him, and thee, and all,  
 As wise, as fair, as strong, as personal.

By nature wrath's his portion, thine no more  
 Till grace his soul and thine in Christ restore.  
 Make sure thy second birth, else thou shall see,  
 Heaven open to Indian wild, but shut to thee. (p. 141)

Although Williams could readily accept the spirit of Narragansett religion, their modes of worship disturbed him so greatly that he feared to watch their ceremonies, lest the devil should ensnare him. Yet he soon became unwilling to attempt their conversion to Christianity. In *Christenings Make Not Christians* (London, 1645), Williams gives an elaborate argument against converting Indians. His main objection is that the vast majority of nominal Christians were actually unconverted and thus as heathen as the Indians. And he caustically suggests Protestants abstain from foreign missions until they succeed with home missions. Furthermore, he argues that the spectacular reports of Catholic conversions of Indians were fallacious: "what monstrous and inhumane conversions have they made; baptising thousands, yea ten thousands of the poor natives . . . compelling them to submit to that which they understood not, neither before nor after such their monstrous Christening of them" (vii, 36). Finally, although Williams admitted he could have converted thousands of Indians to the forms of Christianity, he refused to function as a missionary on the grounds that he himself was not yet able "to open mat-

ters of salvation to them" (VII, 40). Here Williams is moving towards his Seeker position, refusing to identify the Puritan view as the exclusive vision of godliness. Thus, Williams has not only moved to cultural relativism in social and political matters, but in religion as well.

Williams also learned from the Narragansetts something about the nature of religious toleration, an attitude he felt was conspicuously lacking in the Massachusetts colony. He observed of the Narragansetts: "They have a modest religious persuasion not to disturb any man, either themselves, English, Dutch or any in their conscience, and worship, and therefore say: peace, hold your peace" (p. 213). This Indian principle of religious toleration to the end of civil peace is reflected later in Williams' declaration: "God requireth not an uniformity of religion to be inacted and enforced in any civil state; which enforced uniformity (sooner or later) is the greatest occasion of civil wars. . . . It is the will and command of God that . . . a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Anti-Christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries."<sup>18</sup> This famous statement is a fundamental prerequisite for his true commonwealth. Here again he is indebted to Narragansett civilization, if not for the principle, for the demonstration of its cultural efficacy.

There were, of course, aspects of Narragansett culture that Williams found distasteful, but they generally seem to concern manners rather than morals. Especially in *A Key*, which was devoted exclusively to the Narragansett tribe, Williams found little of substance to criticize. But for the other tribes, Williams did express in his letters views more in common with the English settlers, suggesting these other Indians were often untrustworthy, cruel, and cunning as wolves. His few criticisms of the Narragansetts were of their witchcraft, elaborate sports and games, the taking of gruesome war trophies, and strangely enough their very permissive attitudes toward child-rearing. An amusing incident revealing the clash of cultural values can be found in Williams' complaint that Narragansett

<sup>18</sup> Williams, III, 3.

children were treated with so little discipline they became "saucy, bold, and undutiful." To illustrate this point, Williams relates his experience of requesting water of an Indian host, who in turn told his son to fetch it. When the boy refused and Williams chided the father, saying he would discipline his own son in such a case, the father then took up a switch, but the boy did also and flew at his father. Fortunately, the father won the contest and Williams was afforded proof of his stand when the brave "confessed the benefit of correction, and the evil of their too indulgent affection" (p. 118).

Although his relations with the Narragansetts generally continued to be most friendly, Williams was aware of the hatred many other tribes felt for encroaching white settlers. Realistic, after years of arduous negotiations between Indians and whites, Williams judiciously put down his considered position in a letter to Winthrop: "Concerning Indian affairs, reports are various; lies are frequent. Private interests, both with Indians and English are many; yet these things you may and must do. First, kiss truth where you evidently, upon your soul, see it. 2. Advance justice, though upon a child's eyes. 3. Seek and make peace, if possible, with all men. 4. Secure your own life from a revengeful, malicious arrow or hatchet. I have been in danger of them, and delivered from them" (VI, 147). It would be difficult indeed to find a more balanced and dispassionate judgment than this, although no other man of the time was perhaps so constantly embroiled in the confrontation between Indian and colonial white.

Roger Williams' volume on the American Indians contains sufficient evidence for constructing a new chapter in his intellectual biography. It seems reasonably clear that Williams' intimate acquaintance with Narragansett culture provided the catalyst for both his powerful attack upon New England theocracy and his conception of an ideal commonwealth with which to supplant it. Representative examples of Williams' commentary in *A Key* contain the source or verification of many major principles of social and theological thinking later published primarily in *A Bloudy Tenet*.

There can be little doubt that Williams' friendship with the Narragansetts was vital to his lifelong search for a new basis for social and religious reorganization. Williams apparently had never doubted that a commonwealth could be founded upon the values and spirit of Christ; and soon after his arrival in New England, he became convinced that the theocratic commonwealth of Massachusetts had failed in this respect. But until he lived among the Indians, he was unable to formulate a consistent framework of values against which he could measure the failure of Puritan theocracy. In Narragansett culture, Williams discovered a society which demonstrated the compatibility of Christian values with a secular society predicated upon the principles of democratic government, religious toleration, and community ownership.

Williams was no doubt the first colonial writer capable of understanding the cultural basis of the confrontation between colonist and Indian. His cultural relativism enabled him also to theorize about a new social order which perhaps could have preserved the best values of both European and Indian culture. But Williams' vision was ahead of his times, although he was able to institute some of it with limited success in the Rhode Island colony. However, Williams' efforts to establish a basis for peaceful coexistence between the two races was doomed to failure. The Indian culture, not only in New England but throughout America, was soon to be crushed; and ironically Williams' own negotiations with the Narragansetts only hastened their demise because he persuaded them not to form alliances with other tribes against the settlers. And when those tribes were eliminated, the colonists moved against the Narragansetts. Thus, it was Williams' personal tragedy that he discovered in Indian culture values worthy of incorporation into a just commonwealth with a place for both colonist and Indian; but he could not successfully communicate his discoveries to his fellow colonists. As Parrington has remarked: "The gods, it would seem, were pleased to have their jest with Roger Williams by sending him to earth before his time."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Parrington, I, 62.