

# Roger Williams

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# *overview*

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**Roger Williams**, an independent preacher, founded the colony Rhode Island.

- controversial figure in the Puritan landscape; proposed radical ideas
- Providence Plantation's name is based on the idea that agriculture was to be the basis of its economy
- he established with his fellow settlers a liberty of conscience
- the Rhode Island colony was very progressive for its time, passing laws abolishing:
  - > witchcraft trials
  - > imprisonment for debt
  - > most capital punishment sentences
  - > slavery of both blacks and (indentured) whites on March 18, 1652
- Most religious groups were welcomed, with only restrictions on some forms of the Catholic faith.

# *overview*

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## **Some of Williams many radical ideas for the time period:**

- asserted that the Colony magistrate should not punish any sort of breach of the Ten Commandments, such as idolatry, Sabbath-breaking, false worship, and blasphemy; the civil authority should not be the same as the ecclesiastical authority; *Church and state should be separate units*
- every individual should be free to follow his own convictions in religious matters
- people should have freedom of opinion on religious matters—and be able to discuss it for intellectual and meditative purposes.

# *overview*

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**During his life, he was known for controversial opinions and causing intense religious debates.**

In 1630 he left England for Boston and Salem, but quickly chose to align himself with the Separatist Pilgrims in Plymouth.

- By 1633 he returned to Salem due to his view that the Native people in the New World were not heathen and they deserved larger payments for the land.
- Williams is recognized as one of the first humanists in the New World, clearly expressing discontent with the methods of English settlers acquiring land from its inhabitants.
- By 1634 Williams was exiled from the Massachusetts Bay colony due to his stance on separation of church and state— he believed the Puritan Magistrates should not interfere with the personal lives of the community.

# *overview*

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- Banished from the Massachusetts Bay colony he briefly resided with local tribes of Narragansett Natives
- In 1636 he established the town of Providence, south of the Puritan colony
- In 1639 aligned himself with the Seekers— an early sect of Quaker beliefs.

# *Williams vs Puritan Authorities*

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**In the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony the civil laws were heavily influenced by the church doctrine.**

John Cotton helped construct the colonial Puritan church doctrine.

- unlike Separatist's theories, the English Anglican Church is considered a flawed organization, but could be saved by colonial experiences and examples
- a hierarchy of ecclesiastical titles was removed in colonies:
  - > the concept of cardinals, bishops, popes viewed as unnecessary
  - > no authority should be placed between the congregation and Christ
- John Cotton's son documents the process of how any man could declare themselves as member of the church by making a "confession of faith and a declaration of their experiences of a worke of grace in the presence of the whole congregation" (62)— resulting in a cross-examination from male clergy
- women made their requests in writing to be read by the Pastor

Morgan, Edmund Sears. *Visible Saints: the History of a Puritan Idea*.  
New York: Cornell UP. 1965. Print.

# *Williams vs Puritan Authorities*

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- Biblical law is established as the primary law
- personal, moral behavior based on Puritan values were upheld
- leadership was elected from the male members of the congregation
- leadership was assumed a God-sanctioned act
- anyone openly critical of the elected officials could be banished from the community, despite their previous statements of “worke of grace”
- because the colony prospered, God’s favor was shown and no other opinion would be tolerated

# *Williams vs Puritan Authorities*

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**On the other hand, Roger Williams emphasized the concept of an individual having an open choice towards his/her religious beliefs.**

Williams is considered a pioneer in this aspect of individual liberty.

- labelled by some historians as a Nonconformist
- developed a theory of polity in regards to separation of church and state
  - > no church can control the individual due to free will
  - > no church can limit the membership of its congregation due to a harsh definition of “purity”
  - > due to original sin, no one can safely be considered elect
- a Native American just as likely owns the same right to enter heaven, just as a traditional, moral Christian would expect



# *John Winthrop*

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John Winthrop mentions in his journal writings of some of the disagreements the Puritan magistrates held against Williams:

[A]mong other things [Williams] disputes [the Puritans'] right to the lands they possessed here, and concluded that claiming by the King's grant they could have no title, nor otherwise except they compounded with the natives. For this, taking advice with some of the most judicious ministers (who much condemned Mr. Williams's error and presumption), they gave order that he should be convented at the next Court to be censured  
*(The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 159)*

# William Bradford

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William Bradford, within his *History of Plymouth Plantation*, also brings up the many controversies of Williams which resulted in 1633.

Mr. Roger Williams, a man godly and zealous, having many precious parts but very unsettled in judgment, came over first to the Massachusetts; but upon some discontent left that place and came hither, where he was friendly entertained according to their poor ability, and exercised his gifts amongst them and after some time was admitted a member of the church. and his teaching well approved, for the benefit whereof I still bless God and am thankful to him even for his sharpest admonitions and reproofs so far as they agreed with truth. He this year began to fall into some strange opinions, and from opinion to practice, which caused some controversy between the church and him. And in the end some discontent on his part, by occasion

# *William Bradford*

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whereof he left them something abruptly. Yet afterwards sued for his  
dismissal to the church of Salem, which was granted, with some caution to  
them concerning him and what care they ought to have of him. But he soon  
fell into more things there, both to their and the government's trouble and  
disturbance. I shall not need to name particulars; they are too well known  
now to all, though for a time the church here went under some hard censure  
by his occasion from some that afterwards smarted themselves. But he is to  
be pitied and prayed for; and so I shall leave the matter and desire the Lord  
to show him his errors and reduce him into the way of truth and give him a  
settled judgment and constancy in the same, for I hope he belongs to the  
Lord, and that He will show him mercy.

*(Anthology of American Literature, 101)*

# *A Key Into the Language of America*

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**The publication of *A Key* in 1643 served as a dictionary of languages of nearby tribes of Indians, primarily the Narragansett.**

Williams in his education was a quick student for different cultures, developing an understanding five different languages.

- The collection of linguistic studies includes occasional verses relating on various cultural information, similar to Thomas Harriot's earlier scientific observations in Virginia.
- Williams judgmental tone is easily perceived in this work; he often predicts the Nineteenth Century concepts of the "noble savage."
- He often contrasts the lifestyle of the Natives against the supposed Christian values of the European settlers.
- The book is considered the first full major study of Native languages.

# *A Key Into the Language of America*

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**Above each verse, Williams includes a explanatory paragraph.**

Oftentimes the additional text clarifies the intentions of the theme of each poem, utilizing a stronger moralizing tone.

- For example, the opening of chapter one “Of Salutation,” Williams writes:

“There is a savor of civility and courtesy even among these wild Americans, both among themselves and towards strangers”

*(Anthology of American Literature, 139).*

As can be expected, within the poems, Williams often shows views countering the beliefs of the average European. In particular, the opening verse states how “uncourteous Englishmen” are living as wild animals— twisting the stereotype of the living conditions of the average Native. What results, the pagan is more righteous and upstanding than those overseas.

# *A Key Into the Language of America*

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Additionally, the pagan living in America does not need saving by doctrines of the church. Despite the fact they are living as a part of nature, the Native is more courteous than Englishmen.

- For chapter two Williams states:

“It is a strange truth that a man shall generally find more free entertainment and refreshing amongst these barbarians than among thousands that call themselves Christians” (138).

The third stanza in this poem alludes to an Old Testament *Book of Kings*, where the prophet Elijah is fed by wild birds:

6 And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook (1 Kings 17, *HEB*).

# *A Key Into the Language of America*

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This image produces many parallelisms within the metaphor:

- the Natives, like Ravens, are misidentified as unclean and unholy
- both are depicted as scavengers, as wild beasts
- yet both under different circumstances serve as compassionate agents of God

In each case, all of the verses serve a strong theme of persuasion.

- Williams is using a strong sense of pathos to change prevalent attitudes.

Likewise, all of the poems utilize a common format and strategy.

- each poem consists of three stanzas
- each numbered stanza is set in quatrains (four lines)
- the rhyme scheme follows the pattern of A/B/C/B
- these are strong examples of an opposing style to the Puritan Plain Style.

# *A Key Into the Language of America*

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**Negative attitudes towards the Natives by the English settlers oftentimes resulted in violent confrontations.**

Such conflicts are what Williams is hoping to prevent in the future through the publication.

- As mentioned previously, Natives were often depicted as heathens who deserved extermination as a failed species— unless they adopted to white European standards.
- As an example of the types of skirmishes which resulted, in 1637 within the Connecticut Valley, the Pequot fought against the Europeans.
- A defense outpost housing over five hundred Pequots was set on fire; the Natives “were burned to death or killed when trying to escape, and most of the survivors were hunted down, captured, and sold as slaves. The Pequot tribe was wiped out (39-40).”

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Williams, T. Harry, Richard N. Current, and Frank Freidel. *A History of the United States [to 1876]*. New York: Alfred Knopf. 1959. Print.



# *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution*

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**Williams is known most for his political stance of the full separation of church and state.**

In 1634 he published *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience, Discussed in a Conference between Truth and Peace* which addresses his views.

- the title alone establishes an anti-puritan approach to writing
- a tenet is defined as the statement of an opinion, doctrine or dogma; in turn, the concept established is viewed as a truth by a collection of people, such as a congregation or movement
- a “pamphlet war” ensued between himself and John Cotton— both sides writing arguments and counter-arguments, exchanging heavy words between the two sides of the debate