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Roger Williams.

THE greatest contribution of England to the American colonies was Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island, prophet-statesman of democracy and religious liberty. He was a London boy, son of a Merchant Tailor who had his shop on Cow Lane (now King Street). Roger's playground was Smithfield, an important and interesting centre of London life with its weekly market days, fairs, colourful sporting events and official celebrations. Most popular of all was the annual St. Bartholomew's Fair, offering three days of high revelry and entertainment. But the place had a more sombre distinction besides. It was noted for its executions and burnings at the stake. The last heretic to be burned there was Bartholomew Legate, who had been condemned for Arianism.

This was in 1612, when Roger Williams was nine years of age. It is conceivable that the boy witnessed this event. Certainly he knew about it well enough. In 1632 he wrote of himself, "though in Christ called, and persecuted even in and out of my father's house these twenty years." This was exactly twenty years after the burning of Bartholomew Legate, which was evidently the turning point in Roger Williams' life. His parents were members of St. Sepulchre's and there is no indication that they had Puritan learnings. It is not surprising that they made life difficult for young Roger if he presumed to do independent thinking about religion.

Enabled by the patronage of Sir Edward Coke to enter Charterhouse school, young Williams later graduated at Cambridge and took holy orders. To get his bachelor's degree he was obliged to swear allegiance to what James I had called his "three darling articles." They affirmed the supremacy of the king in affairs temporal and spiritual, declared the Prayer-book as authoritative and in harmony with the will of God, and the Thirty-nine Articles agreeable to the will of God. Charles I was even more insistent on the divine rights of kings than his father had been, and he had an energetic inquisitor in Archbishop Laud.

Roger Williams did not desire to serve in such a system. He withdrew from the university and became chaplain for Sir William Masham, a Puritan, at his country estate in Essex. Williams remained there almost two years and through the

Mashams made contacts with leading Puritans who were later influential in the Commonwealth. Several of these were to assist him in obtaining a charter for Rhode Island. Among them was a cousin of Lady Masham by the name of Oliver Cromwell.

It was during his stay at the Masham estate that Roger Williams was married. First he proposed to June Whalley, niece and ward of Lady Joan Barrington, Lady Masham's mother. June was all for it, but the ambitious aunt indignantly refused to allow her niece to marry a poor chaplain. He accepted Lady Joan's verdict but took the occasion as minister to write her a warning about her spiritual condition. This offended her Ladyship even more and she refused to have anything to do with Williams for more than a year, in spite of his good will and the solicitation of Lady Masham and her husband. In December of the same year, 1629, Roger Williams married Mary Banard, maid to the daughter of Lady Masham. The marriage was apparently a happy one.

Meanwhile the condition of the Puritans in England worsened. King Charles intensified his campaign against dissenters by installing Laud as Dean of the Royal Chapel and empowering him to deal summarily with heretics. Soon afterward the king issued the declaration intended to stamp out Puritan interpretation of the Thirty-nine Articles: "We will, that all further curious search be laid aside . . . And that no man hereafter shall either print, or preach, to draw the Article aside any way . . ." Laud and his "System of Thorough" was making the life of a Puritan minister in England very difficult. Many with ideas less heretical than those of Roger Williams were being fined, imprisoned, branded, exposed in the pillory, or having their ears cropped. Archbishop Laud's secret agents were everywhere. Williams knew that his days were numbered in England and he became interested in the project for settlement in the new world across the Atlantic. He attended a meeting of those interested in the Massachusetts Bay enterprise in the summer of 1629 and there he received an invitation from the prospective settlers to go with them as one of their ministers.

He did not accompany the first group, however. It was not an easy decision for him to make. He followed within a year but later confessed, "It was bitter as death to me when Bishop Laud pursued me out of the land, and my conscience was persuaded against the national church, and ceremonies, and bishops. . . ."

He sailed with his wife on the *Lyon* in December, 1630. After a rough crossing, he was welcomed by Governor Winthrop as "a godly minister." He was offered a place as minister in the Boston church. It was the best living in New England.

Williams was amazed, however, to discover that the Puritan congregation had not declared its independence of the persecuting church in England. "Being unanimously chosen teacher at Boston," the conscientious young minister wrote that he refused the call "because I durst not officiate to an unseparated people, as upon examination and conference I found them to be." This was in a letter to John Cotton, who soon became pastor of the Boston Church and a life-long antagonist of Roger Williams.

The Salem church, founded by the Pilgrim Independents eight years before the coming of the Puritans, was less inhibited than the other, and its members welcomed Williams to their community as teacher in the church. The Boston clergy were incensed that Salem would call one who had opposed them, and their threats against Salem caused Williams to resign before his work was fairly begun. He moved then to Plymouth, where he served for two years as teacher in the church and won great respect for his piety and eloquence. He began to interest himself in mission work among the Indians and learned their languages and customs so well that he later published a book on the subject. His church work in Plymouth was voluntary service and he supported himself by farming and trading with the Indians.

Like their brethren in Boston the authorities in Plymouth found the outspoken liberalism of Williams a threat to their position and caused him to return to Salem. After the death of their pastor there in the following year the Salem church made bold to elect Williams in his place. Boston demanded that he be dismissed. Salem refused. The Salem deputies in the colonial assembly were unseated until Salem church should obey its self-appointed politico-religious rulers. Williams and the Salem church wrote a letter protesting this outrage to an independent congregation and circulated it among the churches. The Boston theocrats still had their trump card to play, however. Salem was claiming a strip of disputed ground called Marblehead neck. The court in Boston refused even to consider the case until Williams was dismissed. That broke the Salem rebellion; its Governor, Endicott, bowed to the Boston theocracy. Williams was obliged to resign. Salem got Marblehead right away.

Salem was cowed, but the inquisitors in Boston were not through with Williams. He was called several times before the general court and finally condemned to exile in October, 1635. His crime was in declaring that the American churches should separate themselves from the Church of England; maintaining that civil authorities had no right to enfore the "first table"—the first four of the ten commandments, which had to do only with the individual's relation to God; and permitting the circulation of the Salem letters which dared to question the authority

of the "God's upon earth," as the Massachusetts leader declared themselves to be.

The six weeks which the court allowed Roger Williams to leave the colony was, due to his own illness and his wife's pregnancy, extended until spring—if he would refrain from further discussing his views and drawing others to them. This he never promised, and when dissatisfied neighbours came to his home he freely discussed his views with them as he had always done. At first he had in mind to go alone or only with his family to live and preach among the Indians. Because of the interest of others in freeing themselves from Massachusetts jurisdiction he gradually evolved a plan for a settlement to serve as a haven to those who were persecuted for conscience sake.

The court agreed that Roger Williams must be shipped back to England and it sent a constable to summon him to Boston to be put on a ship then ready to depart. Williams refused to go, and before Captain Underhill and several armed men arrived to take him by force he had slipped away into the wilderness. This was in the midst of a severe New England winter and the sick man would have probably perished if friendly Wampanoag Indians had not found him and taken him to their chief, Massasoit, with whom Williams had had friendly relations while he was in Plymouth. He spent fourteen weeks convalescing in what he called "the filthy smoke holes" of the Indians. Much of his life was to be spent in just such an environment.

Doubtless the fourteen weeks were a time of much serious thinking for Roger Wililams. This was an opportunity for him to reconsider the principles on which he had acted and which seemed to bring him and others so much grief. He decided that these principles were valid and that he would stand by them whatever the cost. He laid his plans for the future as best he could with all the uncertainties. Surely he wanted to get a house built somewhere, plant a crop, and get his wife and two daughters out of Salem. Others had indicated their desire to join him. By spring four had done so. This little group made an agreement with the Indians to settle at Seekonk near the northern tip of Narragansett Bay. They built a few rude shelters and planted crops. Soon, however, a letter came from Governor Winslow of Plymouth declaring that Williams and his party had settled in Plymouth territory and suggesting that they cross the Bay to the land beyond which was free of New England jurisdiction. This was a great blow as it meant losing the year's harvest; it would make the provision of food for the group very difficult for many months. The little group of democrats wished to avoid trouble, however, and gathering their movable belongings they crossed the Bay in their canoe. Indians on the opposite shore

greeted them cordially and helped them find a suitable place for the new settlement. Chief Canonicus gave the land to Williams and he gratefully named it Providence.

A share of the land was given to each of the little band and provision made for similar grants to be made to all who should come later. The first government was democracy pure and simple. The only official was "the officer" whose duty it was to call the heads of families to town meetings, where decisions were made in connection with the government of the little colony. An early compact stated explicitly that the body politic had jurisdiction "only in civil things." Roger Williams had no intention of allowing the new settlement to become a theocracy which would violate the consciences of men in the name of religion.

Already in the first year of his banishment Williams did service for those who had wronged him. The Pequot tribe was on the warpath against the English. Its chiefs sought to make a treaty of alliance with the Narragansetts to drive the English from their lands. If this scheme had been consummated it would have been a severe threat to the New England colonies. At the request of Governor Winthrop, Williams hastened to try to prevent the alliance. He was lodged without guard among the bloodthirsty Pequot emissaries. For three days he reasoned with Canonicus, Miantonomu, and other Narragansett chieftans, trying desperately to dissuade them from the arguments of the Pequots, and he finally succeeded. But the Pequots were determined and Massachusetts called on the other colonies to help her subdue them. The Pequot tribe was destroyed in a bloody slaughter. The Narragansetts remained true to their treaty of neutrality with the colonies, negotiated by Williams, and suggested a plan of attack against the Pequots which Williams forwarded to Boston; it was the one used. Williams had pled for humane warfare, but this part of his suggestions was disregarded. He himself was highly respected by the Indians and never had any trouble with them, but the greed and prejudice of the New England authorities continually aroused the hostility of the various tribes. The English leaders refused to acknowledge that the Indians had any rights to the land. Soon after his arrival in 1631 Williams had astounded Massachusetts Bay authorities by declaring that a patent from the king gave Englishmen no right to the land unless it was also purchased from the Indians.

There were difficulties in Providence too. William Harris, one of the earliest associates of Williams, even in Salem and Seekonk, became extremely avaricious and concocted elaborate plans to secure more than his share of the land and exclude late comers from participating in the distribution. William Arnold and others gave trouble in the same way, even appealing to

Massachusetts and Connecticut to defend them by force in their illegal exploitations. These colonies were glad to do anything which would embarrass Roger Williams and weaken Rhode Island.

New Haven, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Plymouth in 1643 completed negotiations and organised themselves into the New England Confederacy. They wished to present a solid front against the liberalism of Rhode Island. Roger Williams had seen the threat to his little democracy from without and within and left for England just before the official announcement of the Confederation. His purpose was to secure a charter for his own colony. The civil war was on in England and the charter was delayed, but he found plenty to do. He published his *Key into the Indian Language* and engaged in a pamphleteering controversy with John Cotton, who was still in Boston, about religious liberty. He enjoyed fellowship with John Milton, Sir Henry Vane, William Masham, Oliver Cromwell, and other friends now prominent in government. Because of the fuel shortage in London he spent many days hauling in wood from outlying districts for the poor residents of the city. The charter was granted in 1644 and Williams returned to Rhode Island, where he was given a royal reception by the thankful residents.

By 1647 the Rhode Island government was established on a firm and democratic government basis, substantiated by the charter, and Williams retired from governmental affairs to the trading post he had established at Cocumcussot, several miles to the south of Providence. So much of his time and money had been spent in the affairs of the little colony, for which he had received practically no reimbursement at all, that his own financial condition was precarious. For a period of four years he spent most of his time at the trading post, alone or with one of his older children. By the end of that time, however, affairs in Rhode Island had got very bad again. The government there was so little respected by the United Colonies that Massachusetts made bold in 1650 to support William Arnold in a fraudulent scheme to separate Pautuxet from Rhode Island; and Massachusetts annexed Pautuxet and Warwick to its own jurisdiction, ignoring the purchase which Williams had made from the Indians and the charter he had secured from parliament. Another section of Rhode Island had been awarded to an aristocrat speculator, William Coddington, by the Council of State in England, the members of which were apparently unaware of the limits of the Rhode Island charter and the false claims of Coddington.

William made a second trip to England, this time with John Clarke, and remained more than two years. Again he spent

much of his time publishing pamphlets setting forth his views and answering the arguments of John Cotton's books. Affairs in England were in such a state that for some time he could not be effectively heard regarding his petition for a renewal of patent. The parliamentary forces, with the help of Scotland, had been triumphant over the royalists, but Cromwell seemed unable to work with parliament. In 1653 he dissolved it and took over direct control of the government. Williams did not look with favour on this move but maintained his intimate relations with Cromwell himself. It was only two months after the establishment of the protectorate, however, when he received reports of further disorders in Rhode Island and decided to return home before the final granting of the charter. Government had practically collapsed in the colony and vigilante justice had taken its place. Within three months after his return, Williams re-established order and re-organised the government. He himself was elected "president." He was re-elected each year for a total of three successive terms.

For those in the colony who interpreted his principles of liberty as granting unrestrained license he issued a public letter to the citizens of Providence in which he gave the now famous parable of the ship:

> There goes many a ship to sea, with many hundred souls in one ship, whose weal and woe is common, and is a true picture of a commonwealth, or a human combination or society. It hath fallen out sometimes, that both papists and protestants, Jews and Turks, may be embarked in one ship; upon which supposal I affirm that all the liberty of conscience, that ever I pleaded for turns upon these two hinges—that none of the papists, protestants, Jews, or Turks, be forced to come to the ship's prayers or worship, nor compelled from their own particular prayers or worship, if they practice any. I further add, that I never denied, that notwithstanding this liberty, the commander of this ship ought to command the ship's course, yea and also command that justice, peace and sobriety, be kept and practiced, both among the seamen and all the passengers. If any of the seamen refuse to perform their services, or passengers to pay their freight; if any refuse to help, in person or purse, towards the common charges or defense; if any refuse to obey the common laws and orders of the ship, concerning their common peace or preservation; if any shall mutiny and rise up against their commanders and officers; if any would preach or write that there ought to be no commanders or officers, no laws nor orders, nor corrections nor punishments; I say, I never

denied, but in such cases, whatever is pretended, the commander or commanders may judge, resist, compel and punish such transgressors, according to their deserts and merits. This, if seriously and honestly minded, may, if it so please the Father of lights, let in some light to such as willingly shut not their eyes.

This appeal was successful and by the time of the conclusion of his terms as president Williams had succeeded in welding the four towns of the colony together into a workable government.

John Clarke, whom Williams had left in England to continue the work toward a renewal of the Rhode Island Charter, succeeded in securing from Charles II after the Restoration a confirmation of the charter of 1644. From that time the legal status of the colony was not to be seriously questioned. The United Colonies had fought a losing battle for the destruction of Rhode Island. But they felt no more kindly toward it than before. It was still to them "the recepticle of all sorts of riff-raff people" and "nothing else than the sewer of New England," as Governor Winthrop had described it. "Democracy" the same worthy declared to be the "meanest of all forms of government." John Cotton considered the question answered for all time by his query, "If the people be the governors who shall be the governed?"

In his religious experience Roger Williams advanced from a Puritan clergyman to a thorough-going independent. Soon after the establishment of Providence he became a Baptist by allowing Ezekiel Holliman to baptise him, then he immersed Holliman and a few others. The group re-organised themselves into the first Baptist Church in America, with Williams as the pastor. This was probably in 1638. Later in the same year Williams withdrew peacefully from pastorate and membership in the church. He never joined a church again, preferring to call himself a Seeker, because he felt that none of the churches could establish its apostolic succession. He continued to preach his gospel of Christian love and good-will both to the Indians and to his fellow-countrymen, but he was no longer to be a professional religious man. He insisted on freedom for all in Rhode Island; Brownists, Quakers, Jews, Baptists, Anglicans, and those who professed no religion. He disagreed strenuously with the Quakers particularly, and engaged in lengthy debates with them, but that did not cause him to be less insistent on their freedom in the colony both to believe and preach their doctrines.

Religious persecution continued in the other colonies. The penalties for sabbath-breaking, absence from church, blasphemy,

and heresy, were fining, imprisonment, confinement in stocks, earcropping and finally death by hanging.

During the later years of his life, Roger Williams continued to interest himself in the affairs of the colony in spite of failing health. He did not serve as head of the government after 1657 but he was "assistant" for several times and the leaders regularly advised with him about important matters until his death in 1683.

Roger Williams was a peace-maker extraordinary, but he was not a pacifist. After the New England colonies had offended the Indians by repeated humiliations and injustices they finally revolted under the lead of their chief, "King Philip," in 1675 and were put down only with the greatest difficulty by all the forces and funds that the colonies could raise. When war became inevitable Williams arranged for the evacuation of women and children from Providence and became co-captain of the thirty men who remained to defend the town. He made one last attempt to reason with the Indians. They still respected him and desired to do him no harm but insisted that they must defend their rights. Most of Providence was burned, including the home of Roger Williams. He did not rebuild it. He gave away all his land, retaining only enough for his grave.

When the life of Roger Williams[1] is told the story is complete. He was a prophet whose life was his message. He did not originate the ideas of democracy in government and freedom in religion, but he gave these two principles their first full life-size expression. They have become the ideal of his own nation and of the one of which he was the unknowing prophet in the new world; and these have influenced many others.

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[1] Best biographies: Samuel H. Brockunier, *The Irrepressible Democrat*, Ronald Press, 1940; John Dos Passos, *The Ground We Stand On*, pp. 21-158), Houghton Mifflin, 1941; Emily Easton, *Roger Williams*, Houghton Mifflin, 1930.

The Society still possesses a few copies of Dr. Whitley's important edition of the works of John Smyth, published in two volumes by the Cambridge University Press at 31s. 6d. They can only be obtained from the Society. Inquiries for these books and also for back numbers of the *Quarterly* should be addressed to the Rev. E. A. Payne at Regent's Park College, Pusey Street, Oxford.