

THE STORY OF ROGER WILLIAMS RETOLD

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The beginning of Roger Williams's remarkable life may ever remain, as now, a mystery. For nearly three hundred years common authority has located the place of his birth somewhere in Wales, but recent genealogical researches among dusty archives in London have disclosed sundry important papers which it is claimed prove that he was a native of that city. One of these papers, a will of Alice Williams, dated in 1634, speaks of her son Roger, his wife and child, who were beyond the seas, which statement evidently referred to the subject of this sketch. Letters have also been found written by the Roger of London, whose signature corresponds with that of the Roger of Rhode Island, and where the contents of the correspondence would imply identity. Whether these documents prove anything more than that Roger Williams was at one time a resident of London, which no one doubts, is still an open question. The date of his birth, though not universally conceded, is fixed by the best authorities in 1599.

This year, the fourth before the death of England's great queen Elizabeth, was marked by the birth of two boys, distantly related—one in the fens of Huntingdon, the other probably in the mountain fastnesses of Wales, possibly in London or Cornwall—kindred spirits whose influence on civil and religious freedom was to be felt throughout two continents and the world itself: the one, Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, who made the name of Englishman as great as that of Roman; the other, Roger Williams, who became in America the champion of religious liberty. The foundation of his future usefulness was laid in early life. He says: "From my childhood, the Father of lights and mercies touched my soul with a love to himself, to his only begotten the true Lord Jesus, and to his Holy Scriptures." The serious-minded boy taking notes of the sermons in church and the evidence in the courts in the Star Chamber attracted the attention of Sir Edward Coke, the famous lawyer, to whom he was probably indebted for his education, taking his degree with honor at the Cambridge university. After graduation, possibly influenced by Sir Edward Coke, he commenced the study of law, but soon turned his attention to theology and was ordained a minister of the established church.

It was an important period in English history. The great struggle

which commenced with the Reformation was revived, and all England was stirred with the bitter strife between churchman and dissenter. Hatred of Popery and everything connected with it in those days was a mighty passion; it meant "love of truth, love of England, love of liberty, love of God." Elizabeth, though supposed to be friendly to the Protestants, loved the pomp and show of the Romish ceremonials, and insisted on retaining many of them in the established church. The court of high commission, the "Protestant Inquisition," instituted by Elizabeth—who hated the non-conformists more than she did the Papists—and perpetuated in the reign of her successor James I., was in full power. Ministers who refused to comply with its demands were fined, imprisoned, or deprived of their livings. The test given them was, "Ye that will submit to this order, write *Volo*; ye that will not submit, write *Nolo*. Be brief, make no words." If they refused to take this oath, they were imprisoned for contempt; if they took it, they were fined or imprisoned on their own confession. Others, "of whom the world was not worthy," "had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings; destitute, afflicted, tormented, they wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth." Finally there were only two thousand ministers left for ten thousand churches.

Under these circumstances Roger Williams with his Welsh temperament, excitable, generous, courageous, firm, became a Puritan of the strictest sect, a *Brownist*, keen, resolute, and uncompromising. The follower of a man who had been imprisoned twelve times for his opinions, where often it was so dark he was unable to see his hand before him at noonday—what to him were all the ties of country and home where liberty of conscience was at stake? Eleven years after the departure of the Pilgrims, this Puritan minister came also a fugitive from English intolerance, with high hopes and Utopian ideas of a religious paradise, to seek a home in the new world. Vain expectations! On arriving in Boston he found that human nature was the same on both sides of the ocean. The Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay colony had come to America to enjoy their *own* religious liberty, not to grant it to their neighbors, and they were not prepared to welcome this apostle of a purer and broader Puritanism, who had a mission peculiarly his own, and refused to unite with their church because they would not declare publicly that they repented having communed with the church of England. It would seem that men who like the Puritans had left their homes to avoid persecution for their religious faith, would have welcomed him and his teachings with delight, but instead they bitterly opposed both.

From Boston Williams went to Salem, a town the older by three years, and was welcomed there as teacher and assistant pastor. He taught the great doctrine the sacredness of the right of belief—that “the civil magistrate should restrain crime but never control opinion, should punish guilt but never violate the freedom of the soul, and persecution for the cause of conscience is most evidently contrary to the doctrine of the Lord Jesus.”

Here as a citizen of the colony and a minister of the oldest church in America, he endeared himself to all. But the authorities at Boston, holding that the people of Salem had no right to choose a minister whom they of Boston did not approve, were constantly making trouble, and for the sake of peace Williams resigned his pastorate and removed to Plymouth, where he found warm friends and spent two happy years as pastor of their church. Wishing to carry the gospel to the Indians, he spent much time, he says, in “their filthy, poky holes to gain their tongue,” securing at the same time the friendship of Canonicus, Miantinomi, and other chiefs, who were afterward to prove themselves his truest friends in his time of greatest need.

Returning to Salem at the earnest request of his former people, he became again their pastor in spite of the opposition of Boston. Here he continued to advance many new opinions—that it was not right for an unregenerate man to pray or for Christians to pray with such, or to take an oath before a magistrate, even one of allegiance to the state; that King Charles had no right to the Indians' lands, and hence the colonists' charter was invalid; that the government had no right to restrain or direct the consciences of men, and anything short of unlimited toleration for all religious systems was the bitterest persecution. While demanding all this from others, he refused communion to all persons who did not believe just as he did, forbidding his church at Salem to communicate with the churches at the Bay, and on their refusal to comply left them and held meetings in a private house. He even refused to associate with his wife because she attended the church at Salem, and with his children because they were not Christians. Like some of later days, “Orthodoxy was his doxy, heterodoxy his neighbors' doxy.”

His associates were men like-minded with himself, who had suffered persecution for their faith, and abhorred every symbol, badge, and practice associated with their oppressors. One of them, Endicott, who had been a magistrate and lieutenant-governor of Massachusetts, instigated by one of Williams's sermons, in a transport of religious frenzy cut the cross from the royal standard, and many of the soldiers, catching the contagion, de-

clared they would no longer follow a flag on which the Popish emblem was painted.

Meanwhile as a punishment to the Salem church for ordaining Williams, the Bay colony refused to grant them a title to their lands, and on their remonstrance denied them representation in court, and imprisoned Endicott who had dared to speak in their behalf. Williams was again and again brought before the court to defend his church and himself, and refusing to submit to their authority was banished from the colony. His doctrines, they claimed, would overthrow the authority of government; he was "a dangerous man, a teacher of heresy," and hence banished, and his church debarred all rights as citizens till apologies had been made for listening to his preaching. Cotton Mather, in his *Magnalia*, compared him to "a windmill whose rapid motion would set the country on fire." Was it a prophecy?

His sentence was to take effect in six weeks. He returned to Salem to find his church at the feet of the magistrates and his wife reproaching him for not submitting to their requirements. Still he stood firm to his convictions. The whole town was in an uproar at his sentence, for they loved and respected the godly, disinterested man. During this time of trouble his second child was born, and with almost prophetic vision was named *Freeborn*.

Learning that arrangements were being made to send him to England in a ship about to sail, he left his congregation, who gathered around him with prayers and tears, to find a home in the Narragansett wilderness. With only his pocket compass for a guide, he wandered here for fourteen weeks in the bitter winter season, not knowing, as he says, "what bed or bread did mean."

The sufferings of that winter can never be told. Its effects were felt to old age. Had it not been for the Indians whose friendship he had gained at Plymouth, the fierce Canonicus loving him as his own son, he must have perished. From his old friend Massasoit he obtained a grant of land in Seekonk, where he commenced building a house. Crops were planted and in vigorous growth, and it seemed at last that the weary traveler had found a resting-place. But no, he was not yet out of the jurisdiction of the colonies, and soon received orders, with many professions of love and affection, to move farther on, where he could have the country free before him. Without remonstrance or complaint he embarked in a canoe with five others to seek again a home in the wilderness. After landing at "Slate Rock," and receiving from the Indians their friendly greeting, "What cheer, Netop, what cheer!" he ascended the Providence

river and found on its banks the resting-place he sought, calling it "Providence" in token of the Divine care.

He had been obliged to mortgage his house in Salem, had lost his spring planting by his removal from Seekonk, and was very poor. "Day and night, at home and abroad, on the land and water, at the hoe and at the oar," he labored for bread. Yet he reserved to himself no lands, no rights more than he granted to the poorest stranger, though they were his own, he says, "as much as the coat on his back," having been obtained by purchase from the Indians. Afterward, when the land on what is now Main street was divided into the "Providence plantations," Williams received about two hundred dollars.

Three years after his settlement in Providence, having doubts about any other than immersion being the proper mode of baptism, he organized the first Baptist church in America, first being immersed himself by Mr. Holman, one of his lay members, and afterward immersing Holman and ten others; but a few months later he withdrew from the church altogether, holding that the true apostolic church had ceased to exist on earth. Is it any wonder, in view of his life-long troubles with the existing churches? Here was founded the first government, since Christianity ascended the throne of the Cæsars (says Judge Story), to acknowledge the right of conscience; the model on which the American Republic was to be built, proclaiming to all that government should have dominion only in civil things. To this region came the persecuted for conscience' sake to find a refuge and a shelter; here came the Quakers from the storm of persecution in the Bay colonies; here, too, came Coddington, Clark, and Mrs. Hutchinson to find in Acquidneck the "Isle of Peace."

Among all these discordant elements Roger Williams was the peacemaker. It was he who obtained Acquidneck for the followers of Mrs. Hutchinson; it was he who spent days and nights in peril of his life to avert Indian troubles, again and again making peace when all New England was ripe for war, acting as mediator even among the Indians themselves; at one time for three days and nights in constant danger of their glistening knives, breaking up the conspiracy of the Narragansetts and Pequots against Massachusetts—this for those whose cruel act had driven him into exile. So important were his services that a proposition was made in Boston to revoke his sentence of banishment. Of his Massachusetts persecutors he says, "I did ever upon my soul honor and love them, even when their judgment led them to afflict me," and in all his writings there is not one word of blame for them. Owing to continued disputes among the colonists, increasing Indian troubles, and the fact that Massachusetts,

Plymouth, and Connecticut had formed a union for the common defense, leaving Providence and Rhode Island "out in the cold," it was thought best to unite them under a common government, and Williams was sent to England to obtain a charter. His time on the voyage was occupied in preparing his *Key to the Languages of America*, for which he had been fourteen years collecting material. This was published soon after his arrival in England.

His mission was a complete success. The guest of Sir Harry Vane who had been banished from the Bay colonies with Mrs. Hutchinson, and had risen to place and power under the Protectorate, Williams had no difficulty in obtaining the charter desired. Bearing a letter of remonstrance and recommendation from the home government he landed at Boston, was allowed to depart unmolested, and was received at Providence with great rejoicing and an escort of fourteen canoes.

It would seem that from this time peace should have come to him, but there seemed to be no peace: continued dissensions, never-ceasing Indian troubles, treachery on the part of Coddington by which the charter was invalidated, made another appeal to England necessary, and Williams and Clark were sent to the mother country as agents to adjust the troubles. Williams was again the guest of Sir Harry Vane, and the intimate friend of Cromwell and Milton, who were kindred spirits. During the two weary years of waiting for the adjustment of the colonial difficulties he utilized his proficiency in the Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, and Dutch languages by teaching them conversationally, Milton himself being one of his scholars.

After his return he was elected president of the colony, and the word *Hope* was added to the anchor on the Rhode Island flag. But peace was not yet. Quaker troubles, Indian wars, colonial quarrels, nearly crushed the brave spirit which till the end of his long career made unceasing efforts for peace. "His patience," said Governor Winthrop, "was often tried but never conquered." Yet, "ring the bells low, and burn the lights faintly," for at his trading post in Kingston Roger Williams was licensed to sell liquor! True, it was only to the Indians, which makes a difference. Still, "pity 'tis 'tis true," that he who had brought so much of good to his red brethren should have had any share in putting to their lips the white man's curse, the Indian's "fire water."

A prolific writer, Roger Williams excelled in controversial ability. Lash of muscle he did not allow for his opponents, but lash of tongue and pen he could and did wield with vigor. His controversial spirit is seen in the quaint titles of his books; such as *George Fox Dugged out of his Bur-*

rows and *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience*. The latter being replied to by Mr. Cotton in *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience, Washed and made White in the Blood of the Lamb*. The undaunted Williams retaliated with *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution made yet More Bloody by Mr. Cotton's Endeavor to wash it white in the Blood of the Lamb*. We see him, too, an old man in the seventies, rowing an open boat from Providence, in the dead of winter, to engage in a controversy with George Fox in the old Quaker meeting-house in Newport.

Such was Roger Williams, the apostle of religious liberty, the patron saint of Rhode Island, who shaped its history for more than forty years—a man of stern convictions, strong opinions, and sharp corners; “most hated where least known;” stern and unbending to his opponents, generous and genial to his friends, charitable and magnanimous to his enemies; a compound of bigotry and liberality, yet of pure and blameless life; his “sincerity the key to his character,” his one idea the sanctity of conscience; its results seen in our “declaration of independence,” our freedom from the union of church and state, our liberty to worship God; in his day a crank, an outcast, a tramp: now,

“With freedom's soil beneath our feet,  
And freedom's banner streaming o'er us,”

a man whom thousands delight to honor; whose name is a synonym for the good, the brave, the true, the kind-hearted, the magnanimous; in whose honor we erect monuments and public buildings; name our societies, halls and churches, so that in more senses than one it may be said, as of Sir Christopher Wren in St. Paul's cathedral, “If you ask for his monument, look around you.” His life story can never be told; its influence spreads in ever widening circles to the furthest limits of civilization, and stretches forward through the coming ages to all time.

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