

Meet Roger Williams: Review in Evangelicals Now, December 2019

The Subversive Puritan: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience

By Mostyn Roberts

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Roger Williams nurtured a new democracy with full religious liberty – Rhode Island, the world's first such state. Scholars admire him. The young Oxford political theorist Teresa Bejanⁱ urges students to study this 'hot evangelical' ('more Puritan than the Puritans') to see how a tolerant society can deal with intolerance. But quite possibly no one in your church has heard of him!

Now Mostyn Roberts' excellent biography - well-informed, scholarly and readable – fills an important gap. Unlike many writers on Williams, the author is British (Welsh, to be exact) and a Christian – he is Pastor of Welwyn Evangelical Church.

Roger Williams arrived in Massachusetts in 1631. He refused a position in the Boston church tainted by links with the Church of England. He disputed England's claims over land properly belonging to Americans (people since called 'Indians'). Most controversially, he opposed all state-enforced religious compulsion. The authorities tried to send him back east to face Archbishop Laud's justice. He fled into the snowy forests where he used his knowledge, gained with evangelistic intent, of American languages to negotiate land for a new settlement in what became Providence. Refugees from persecution in the rest of New England arrived. Battling for jurisdiction, he went to London in 1643 to get a new charter for Rhode Island as a democracy with complete freedom of religion. Massachusetts' rival claims had Presbyterian and 'Independent' (Congregationalist) support in Parliament, but Williams' strategy was a masterpiece. First he published *Key into the languages of America*, a ground-breaking work of linguistics and anthropology, making him the recognised authority on the American situation. Then John Cotton's letter defending

Williams' expulsion mysteriously appeared in print, denting the reputation of the admired Massachusetts church leader in the eyes of London opinion worried about religious persecution. Williams got his charter and sailed westward - leaving with the printer a hastily written but startlingly brilliant study of politics and theology. *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* shows from the bible that God wills complete freedom for all – 'Paganish, Jewish, Turkish or anti-Christian consciences and worships' – in a civil state making no claim to reproduce ancient Israel.

Fifty years before Locke, Williams made the practical and biblical case for religious liberty that changed the course of our history. This fine book shows how he did it.

ⁱ *Mere Civility* by Teresa Bejan is published by Harvard University press. She discusses Roger Williams in a talk entitled '*Tolerating Intolerance: What Can Roger Williams Teach Us Today?*' available on www.rwu.edu/library/news/case-you-missed-it-dr-teresa-bejan