



## ***The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience***

**Alan E Johnson**

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**Review by Serena Newman**

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“When they [the Church] have opened a gap in the hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world, God hath ever broke down the wall itself, removed the Candlestick, and made His Garden a wilderness...” Roger Williams, 1644.

In *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, Alan Johnson takes a completely new look at the early beginnings of what we all accept today as a given in American history, the concept of “separation of church and state” in our governmental system. In this exploration of Williams’ output Johnson brings the reader along on a journey that reveals that, long before Thomas Jefferson and James Madison argued for a “wall of separation between church and state” for a young America, the seventeenth-century New England minister Roger Williams’ belief in “freedom of conscience” (89) for all men – believers in Christianity or not – had pre-dated their convictions by more than a century.

*The First American Founder* is both an informative and insightful exposé of an “idea” perhaps “before its time,” but one that would nevertheless help shape the future of the American government. In delineating the many steps that Roger Williams went through in examining his faith, as well as his moral beliefs, and how those tied in with his concept of what was “just” and “right,” Johnson brings the reader along on the journey, beginning with some necessary historical background into the religious ideology of those who first settled in Massachusetts Bay and in the Plymouth Colony. Both Puritans and Pilgrims

brought a strict religious belief that was grounded in Calvinist predestination theology which called for religious conformity in all things, and with severe consequences for any who dissented. The idea of “religious freedom” actually translated only to the freedom to practice *their* religion (238), free of persecution from England’s “Established [Anglican] Church” (16-17, see also Appendix B).

Johnson’s Preface provides a helpful road-map for the rest of the book, and the first eight chapters correspond to “successive periods” in Roger Williams’ life, beginning with his early life in England and moving on to his arrival in the New World (xxvi, 22). Johnson also divides these chapters into sections corresponding with the topics discussed. One of the more consequential, Chapter 2, along with covering various developments in his life, brings the beginning of Williams’ conflict with “New England theocracy” (51-60) – a conflict that ultimately led to his permanent banishment from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and his founding of Providence Plantations (later to become Rhode Island) established on the basis of “full liberty of conscience” (61-73). Chapter 9 (250-295) deals with Roger Williams’ influence on the “generation that obtained American independence and established the Constitution and Bill

of Rights." Chapter 10 then introduces a contemporary perspective, relating the issues to the present day in which the question of separation of church and state is in some ways still a debatable issue (308-311).

In *The First American Founder*, Alan Johnson not only brings out the religious aspects of Roger Williams but also sheds light on Williams' acumen as a statesman and his "unusually enlightened approach" to Native Americans (112, 155). Johnson cites a letter authored by Williams to the Town of Providence – often called his "Ship of State" letter (221-224) – in answer to the reported unrest during his absence. In it Williams made clear the importance of civil government and the "common good" in matters not spiritual, putting an end to any idea of "anarchic views." Aside from his political and religious treatises, Williams also authored *A Key Into the Language of America*, a work based on the Native American tribes that he had encountered, and who had helped Williams to survive the winter of his banishment from Massachusetts Bay (110-117). His understanding and appreciation for the Native American people was demonstrated through both his writing and his firmly held belief that the only honest way to acquire new land in America was through "voluntary transactions" of trade or purchase from the tribes involved (37, 64, 114) – a novel idea to the English Crown. Unfortunately, Williams' idea (expressed in the Preface) that "this *Key*, respects the Native language of it, and happily may unlooke some Rarities concerning the Natives themselves, not yet discovered..." (111) was never realized.

Johnson has given a well-rounded view of Roger Williams and his valuable contribution to American heritage. *The First American Founder* is accessible to both the general and the more specialized reader. He has carefully outlined Williams' meticulous thinking, and has examined the means by which he could be, and was, an influential force in American history (251). Johnson's careful research has found evidence that those establishing the new government for the United States – such as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and John Adams – had been influenced by Williams' progressive ideas as they were expressed in his various books, treatises, and letters; these were read by others with whom these prime movers had contact both before and during the formative years of the American republic: Rhode Island governor Stephen Hopkins, Baptist preacher Isaac Backus, and Congregational minister Jeremy Belknap to name just a few (252-253, 285-286).

There could therefore be no better title than that which Johnson has chosen for *The First American Founder's* penultimate chapter (250): "Roger Williams and the Founding of the United States of America."

**Serena Newman** holds an M.A. in History from the University of Mass., focusing primarily in Early American and Constitutional History; she has taught as Adjunct Faculty in History and Government and is currently a Reader with the College Board AP History Exams.