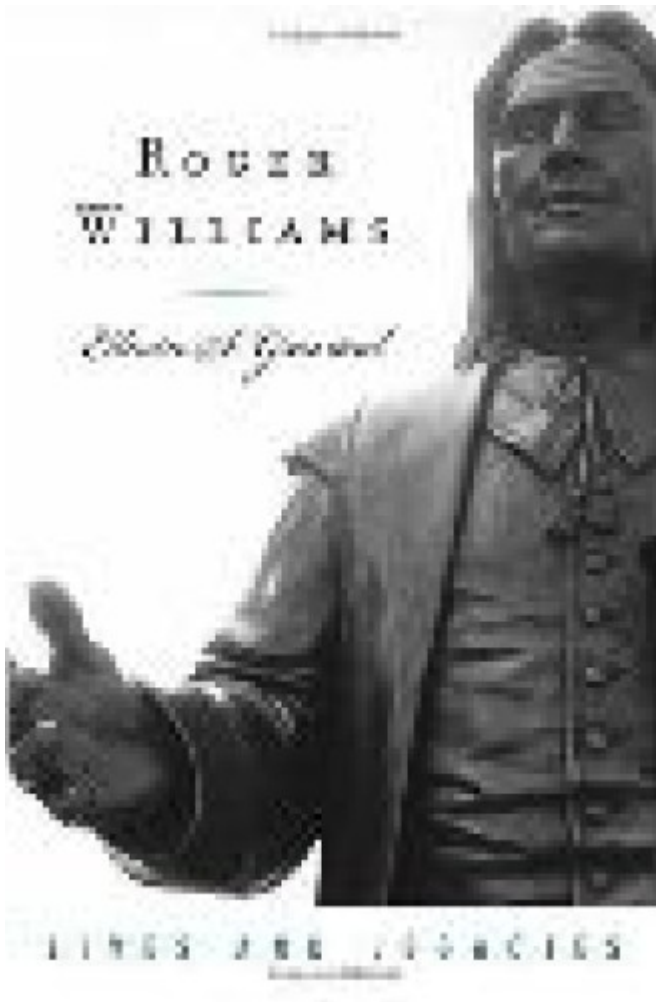


# Roger Williams

reviewed by [James P. Byrd](#) in the [April 4, 2006](#) issue

## In Review



## Roger Williams

Edwin S. Gaustad  
Oxford University Press

Anyone browsing through a bookstore will notice the popular new biographies of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. No doubt

many Americans are devouring these books in search of insights that the founding generation can provide into today's political controversies and questions about national identity. If so, readers should also consider an often neglected founder, Roger Williams, and add another book to their reading lists—this biography by Edwin S. Gaustad.

Although Roger Williams lived a century before the Revolutionary era, he deserves recognition alongside those whose names are well known and whose faces are etched on coins and bills. Even a short list of Williams's accomplishments is impressive. He was America's first prolific advocate for religious liberty, he knew more about American Indians than almost any other colonist and became a strong advocate for their rights, he founded the colony of Rhode Island as an experiment in religious liberty, and he established the first Baptist church in America.

Despite these accomplishments, most Americans are unfamiliar with Williams. Many of the books he wrote are obscure, and even if they were available, today's readers would have difficulty deciphering them because Williams scribbled his books while struggling to survive on the American frontier. Though Williams would have agreed with much of Jefferson's thought, his eloquence does not approach that of the author of the Declaration of Independence.

Another problem is that most books about Williams have attracted few readers outside of university campuses. That should change with the volume by Gaustad, a biographer worthy of introducing this colonial radical to contemporary readers. For nearly five decades, Gaustad has solidified his reputation as not only one of the leading authorities on American religious history, but also one of the clearest and most entertaining writers in the field. Gaustad tells Williams's story the way it should be told—as an exciting narrative of political intrigue, religious controversy and cultural exploration on the American frontier.

Gaustad sets the scene vividly, allowing the reader to encounter Williams as an educated radical who threatened nearly every accepted idea and institution he encountered. In Williams's world almost everyone believed that a civilized society required a religious foundation—an official church endorsed by the state. Citizens, ministers and political officers agreed that without a sturdy religious foundation society would degenerate into chaos, and that religious divisions would wreak social havoc. In the Puritan colonies, therefore, religious liberty was a dangerous idea. But Williams argued that religious liberty was not only good political policy, it was

authentically Christian, and it was certainly not a threat to civil order. Williams believed that Christians should witness through peaceful conversion, not coercion, and that when governments endorsed a particular church, they caused dissension among those who were forced to support the state church against their will. Williams pointed out that most of the wars in the 17th century involved religious combatants; he believed that religion could inspire not only love and unity but hatred and violence if not handled properly.

Williams also enraged his Puritan colleagues by contending that their land was not truly theirs but had been stolen from the Indians. He thus threatened the Massachusetts Bay Colony at both its theoretical and literal foundations. It is no wonder that Massachusetts leaders banished him from the colony in 1635.

In superb style Gaustad illuminates Williams's ideas, describes the conflicts they provoked and traces their results as they were worked out in Williams's adventures in Rhode Island. He also brings Williams's life to bear on today's world, which is not as far a stretch as one might imagine.

As Gaustad observes, we struggle with many of the questions that Williams did, and his responses continue to challenge and perplex us. How should we understand religious liberty—an idea that nearly everyone claims to support, though few agree on its definition? What should we make of religious and cultural pluralism? And more particularly, how should devout Christians relate to their neighbors who are of other faiths, or of no particular faith at all? Finally, how can we recognize religious persecution in our world when its perpetrators often do not see themselves as persecutors? Williams did not answer all of these questions, but his insightful struggles with them remain instructive for us.