

**AS TO ROGER WILLIAMS, AND HIS
"BANISHMENT" FROM THE
MASSACHUSETTS PLANTATION; WITH A
FEW FURTHER WORDS CONCERNING THE
BAPTISTS, THE QUAKERS, AND
RELIGIOUS LIBERTY: A MONOGRAPH**

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As to Roger Williams, and his "banishment" from the Massachusetts Plantation; with a few further words concerning the Baptists, the Quakers, and religious liberty: a monograph by Henry Martyn Dexter

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HENRY MARTYN DEXTER

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CONCERNING

THE BAPTISTS, THE QUAKERS, AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY:

3 Monograph,

BY

HENRY MARTYN DEXTER, D.D.,

*Member of the Massachusetts Historical Society, the American Antiquarian Society, and the New England
Historic-Genealogical Society; Corresponding Member of the Long Island Historical Society;
Editor of THE CONGREGATIONALIST; Author of "Congregationalism: Whence it is,
What it is," etc.; "The Church Polity of the Pilgrims, the Polity of the
New Testament;" "Pilgrim Memoranda," etc.; and Editor
of Wiggie's Annotated Exact Reprint of "Mour's
Relation," "Church's Philip's War, and
Eastern Expeditions," etc.*

Πάταξον μὲν ἔφη, ἄκουσον δέ.

BOSTON:
CONGREGATIONAL PUBLISHING SOCIETY,
1876.

TO THE
HONORABLE ROBERT C. WINTHROP, LL.D.,

President of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

My Dear Sir:

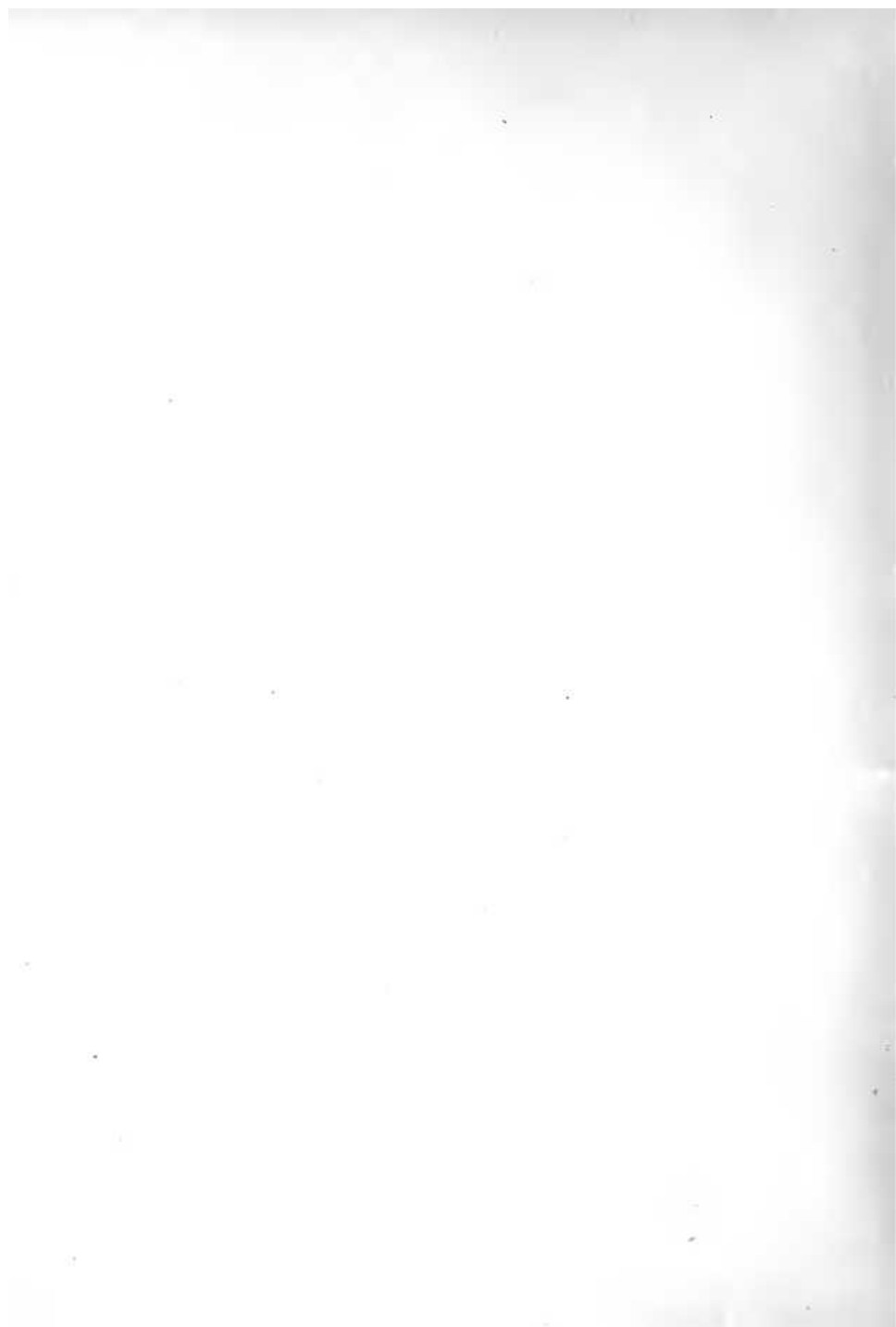
For a contemporary record of the greater portion of the events which illustrate the relation of Roger Williams to the Massachusetts men, posterity is indebted to the diligent and candid pen of your noble and illustrious ancestor, "ye Governour." This circumstance suggested the desire—which the sense of your eminent worthiness of such a lineage, and a large experience, these many years, of your marked personal kindness, have confirmed—to be permitted thus to associate your Name with this endeavor to throw additional light upon the life and character of the renowned, but unpretending, Founders of the Colony of the Bay.

I have the honor to be,

With great and grateful regard,

Faithfully yours,

HENRY M. DEXTER.



INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

A FEW excellent—if not erudite—people last winter petitioned our General Court to revoke “the sentence of banishment against Roger Williams,” which was decreed in 1635. They urged such action, in the interest of “historical justice,” on the ground that that decree was in the nature of punishment for the “offence” of his advocacy of “perfect religious liberty.”

I have sought to take advantage of any possible public interest growing out of this remarkable procedure, to invite the intelligent, thinking and candid portion of the community, to re-examine the whole subject of the relation of the Massachusetts people of the seventeenth century to the case of the distinguished person whose memory this petition aimed to vindicate; and, later, to the case of the Baptists and Quakers, as well. I have been the more anxious to do this, because the limited acquaintance of some of our earliest historians with the facts—to say nothing of any misconceptions, or prejudices, which made it easier for them to see things in one light than in another—has introduced much erroneous conception, and consequent honest misrepresentation, to the pages of many modern histories having wide circulation, and giving tone to the public mind, but which have been written by scholars quite too content to take such writers as Hubbard, Backus and Bentley for their warrant, without the pains to go behind them to those underlying registers, treatises and documents, which are, in reality, the only “original” authorities.

The task—a very humble, if an arduous one—which I set for myself, was to go carefully through all accessible records, books and papers, which from their date, intent, or authorship, offer any coeval

contribution of fact to the illustration of the subject in hand; and then collate and arrange the results. I cannot aver that my research has been exhaustive; only that I have sought to make it such. I cannot claim that I have succeeded perfectly, and without any coloring from prejudice, in classifying and harmonizing the fruits of that research; only that I have conscientiously endeavored to do so. I cannot hope that, as the result of the new view which, in this contemporaneous light, is put upon many passages in the history, the world will be convicted of a great wrong hitherto largely done to the memory of the Puritans of Massachusetts; but I must be allowed to think that any historian who shall go on to reproduce the former slanders in the face of the demonstration of their true character herein offered, must — unless he refute it — fairly be condemned as paying better fealty to indolence, or prejudice, than to the truth.

For greater clearness, all dates of importance — as will be seen — have been given in both Old Style and New.

I have only to add that, as I have intended to make no statement, however comparatively unimportant, which does not rest upon valid evidence, and as I have desired in all cases to guide others to the sources of knowledge which I have found for myself; I have no apology to make for the notes with which, otherwise, so small a treatise might seem to be overburdened.

H. M. D.

Greystones, New Bedford, 15 Jan. 1876.

THE general subject of the character of Roger Williams, and of his relation to the early colonists of New England, has been called up to public attention afresh by a petition from sundry residents in the town of Sturbridge, Mass., addressed to the Massachusetts Legislature of 1874-5, asking them to revoke the order of banishment before which, in the winter of 1635-6, he retreated into what is now known as Rhode Island. It is not important here to refer to the various inaccuracies of statement found in that petition itself, or to discuss either the legal question how far the General Court of the Commonwealth, in these years of Grace, has power to annul action taken by the Court of the Colony two hundred and forty years ago; or the moral question, how much such action, if taken, could do in the way of securing any needed "justice" toward the remarkable man to whom reference is made, or to his memory. It does seem to be suitable, however, to avail of the occasion for making a clear, authentic and complete statement of the facts, as they actually occurred; to the end that slanders oft-repeated may be seen in their true character, and "justice" be done to *all* the noble memories involved.

It is astonishing how much the inherent difficulty of thoroughly comprehending a man who lived two or three hundred years ago is increased, if he were a somewhat pivotal and distinguished person; and, more especially, if he have been subsequently taken up and glorified, as their pet hero, by any large and enthusiastic body of believers. This seems to be particularly true of Roger Williams. The materials for his exact history are exceptionally abundant. Of few who shared with him the labors, and excitements, and controversies, of the first half-century of New England, will the close student discover so many and so amply revealing testimonies; from his own hand in letters and treatises, and from the hands of friends and enemies in letters, records, and anti-treatises. He, of all men, ought, by this time, to be as accurately as widely known. But the denomination of Christians known as Baptists, having canonized him — although never such a Baptist as they are, and for but a very short period of time a Baptist at all — have manifested great reluctance to give due consideration to a large portion of the evidence bearing upon the case; and seem to prefer, without regard to facts making fatally against their position, to re-utter the old encomiums and denunciations; as if an inadequate statement could, by persistent reiteration, be made a whole truth.

It has thus become a common representation of the case, that it was the Church-and-State controversy, and Mr. Williams's superior liberality on that subject, which led to his banishment; and it has even gone so far that leading journals¹ of that denomination scout the very idea of any other view, as something which to all the rest of the world but Massachusetts is special pleading, that is, on the face of it, absurd.

There is a very simple, albeit a laborious, way to settle this question. It is the only way in which it ever can be settled. It is to go straight to the original sources, and candidly, and in detail, to examine them, and make up a judgment upon them; without regard to the rhetoric of superficial biographers, or prejudiced historians, or the misapprehensions of a later public sentiment by them misled. This it is proposed now to attempt.

As is true of so many of those best known in connection with the settlement of New England, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to fix with absolute certainty the date, and place, of the birth of Roger Williams. All that can be positively *proved* concerning his early life is that, when a youth, he attracted the favorable attention of Sir Edward Coke, and, on his influence, was elected a scholar of Sutton's Hospital (now the Charter House) 25 June-5 July, 1621;² that he obtained an exhibition there 9-19 July, 1624;³ and that he was matriculated a pensioner of Pembroke College, Cambridge, 7-17 July, 1625, and took the degree of Bachelor of Arts there in January, 1626-7.⁴ It is *probable*

¹The *Examiner and Chronicle* of 7 April, 1875, blandly reaffirms, without so much as an apology for the want of proof, the old notion that it was this controversy which led to the harsh action of the colony; with amusing conceit intimating that it is superfluous to thresh again the straw of this old controversy, because "all the world outside of Massachusetts [which happens to have in her archives the best material in the world for judgment; some of it in the shape of 'straw' that never yet was 'threshed'] has long since made up its verdict." And the *Watchman and Reflector* of 15 April—replying to an article in the *Christian Register*—says again: "the main ground of the action against Williams was his doctrine of soul-liberty." It goes on: "Toleration was [by the Massachusetts men] decreed as a fountain-head of heresy, even as original sin was the primal source of all sins. . . . He proclaimed truth against the [this] mighty error of our fathers. That his views, if he had been left alone, would have wrecked the colony, is absurd. They would have saved it from a long dark night in its history, and made it the brightest spot on earth." It surely cannot be an error to assume that, so far as it takes representation in the columns of two of its

principal journals, the historical scholarship of the Baptist denomination now stands pledged to this proposition: that Roger Williams was banished by the Massachusetts Colony specifically for asserting the doctrine of "soul-liberty," and for advocating universal toleration in religion.

²*Saddleir MSS.* in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge.

³*Records of Charter House. Elton's Life of Roger Williams*, 23, 100.

⁴Arnold, in his, for the most part, excellent *History of Rhode Island*, [i: 47-50] discusses this subject with care and candor. He gives full weight to Prof. Elton's examination of the matter, and to all the evidence adduced by him in proof that *Rodericus* Williams, who entered at Jesus College, Oxford, from Conwy! Cayo in Wales, was our Roger; but is compelled—by various considerations—to decide that the weight of probability strongly favors the conclusion that *Rogerus* Williams, whose name appears upon the "subscription book" of Pembroke College, Cambridge, under date of 1626, was the man. There would seem to be no reasonable doubt that he is right.