

William Tell

Autor(en): **J. J. F. S.**

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WILLIAM TELL.

In my early schooldays, in common with most Swiss children, I accepted the story of William Tell as an article of faith the authenticity of which I no more doubted than that of the gospels. As I grew older and more discerning I came to realize that my hero worship was founded on a historical myth. Reluctantly, I had to relegate the William Tell Saga to the growing list of my lost illusions.

The story itself is well-known: How Gessler, the tyrannical bailiff (Landvogt) of the dukes of Austria ordered those who passed to salute the Duke's hat set up in Altdorf, how William Tell, refusing to do so, escaped execution by shooting an apple placed on his young son's head, how taken as prisoner in a boat with Gessler and his men, he leapt ashore during a storm and from an ambush shot Gessler in the hollow lane leading to Küssnacht.

Let it be admitted from the outset that historical research has failed to discover any evidence of W. Tell's existence or any confirmation of the story. According to Tschudi the events with which Tell's name is associated, took place in the year 1307, but the contemporary chronicles and documents which have come down to us make no mention of Tell or of his deeds. The first appearance of the Tell story occurs in a popular ballad dated 1470. It was thereafter incorporated in every history of Switzerland and William Tell became the traditional national hero of the Swiss.

The legend took shape, no doubt, during the early struggles of the Swiss for their independence. In the 13th century, the three forest-cantons which formed the nucleus of the Swiss Confederation, had placed themselves under the protection of the Holy Roman Empire whose suzerainty they acknowledged. Their internal independence, however, had been guaranteed by a Charter granted to them by Heinrich, son of the Emperor Frederick II, in 1240, a document in which they are referred to as "the free people." During Frederick's reign and that of his successor Rudolph, the treaty appears to have been respected. It was at the death of Rudolph in 1291 that the Swiss, fearful of the future, entered into the solemn covenant, consecrated by the Rütli oath, which marks the beginning of Switzerland's political existence.

The idea of freedom was therefore deeply engrained in the minds of the early Swiss and it is not surprising that their imagination was stirred when, after their long and bloody struggles for independence from the Austrian yoke, the William Tell legend was born. Whence came the legend? There is reason to believe that it was imported from northern Europe. The folk-tale of a hero-archer was widespread, it occurs, apple and all in a Danish Saga of the period and it has its parallel in the story of Robin Hood, also a legendary popular character of the middle ages.

The William Tell legend has inspired two great works of art, Schiller's drama (1804) and Rossini's opera (1829), besides which Kissling's pleasing statue in Altdorf deserves mention. Rossini's work is well-known to all music lovers, the libretto may be open to criticism, but the music is magnificent. As to Schiller's drama, some interesting data concerning the conception and the making of it is supplied by Robert Boxberger, his biographer and editor of his collected

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writings. Schiller, it would seem, has never been to Switzerland. It was Charlotte von Lengefeld whom later he married who first awakened the poet's interest in Swiss history. She had visited Switzerland in 1783 and became much impressed by Müller's historical work. But it was mainly due to the influence and the advice of Goethe that Schiller wrote the drama. Goethe knew Switzerland well, he had travelled there several times and contemplated writing an epic poem on the subject of William Tell. He abandoned the idea, however, and left it to Schiller to dramatize the story. Schiller's main sources were Tschudi's chronicles, written in the 16th century, and the histories by Muller, Haller and Etterlin. In addition he studied such writers as Ebel, Füssli, Tschocke, Fäsi, Scheuchzer and others, thus acquiring the knowledge necessary for an authentic background to the dramatic action. The drama was completed and given its first performance in 1804. It achieved a great success and made the William Tell story popular throughout the world.

The folklore of most countries reflects the national character of their inhabitants. The story of William Tell is no exception to this rule. It reveals the love of liberty, respect for human rights and human integrity and the sense of justice, which can be said to be the almost instinctive attributes of the Swiss people. The story may be a myth, a fable, but it illustrates the sturdy independence of their forefathers and will ever remain to all Swiss a cherished tradition and a proud heritage.

With crossbow armed, he haunts the mountain-side,
A dim and shadowy figure of the past,
His memory lives, though centuries have passed,
Wherever freedom-loving men abide.
His sturdy people tyranny defied,
The stormy times wherein their lot was cast
Found them unwavering, ever holding fast
Those ancient rights for which they fought and died.

A yeoman-archer, born of humble folk,
He strove to overthrow the alien yoke,
Beloved by young and old, his stirring tale,
Though but a myth veiled in obscurity,
Is yet a symbol, on a minor scale,
Of man's eternal quest for liberty.

J.J.F.S.