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FOCUS ON A LEGEND



The William Tell open air play is performed at Interlaken

Colin Farmer examines that much-loved, controversial symbol of liberty – Tell

EVERY summer up to 40,000 spectators pack an open-air theatre near the Swiss holiday resort of Interlaken to see performances of Schiller's stirring drama, "William Tell".

Every few years a further 20,000 people watch similarly emotional scenes unfold in the Uri cantonal capital of Altdorf – where, nearly seven centuries ago, ace archer Tell reputedly shot an apple from his son's head.

Altdorf's Tell memorial, erected in 1895, has become one of the most admired monuments and popular places of pilgrimage in Switzerland. The region's attractions also include a trio of Tell chapels. And at Bürglen (believed to be the birthplace of our national hero) there's even a Tell Museum.

Yet it matters little to the faithful fans and followers of Tell that the daring deeds with which he was credited for so many centuries probably never happened at all. Or indeed even existed in the first place.

According to popular legend William Tell was a proud but peace-loving peasant who lived in Bürglen around the late 13th and early 14th centuries.

One day he and his young son

visited Altdorf where the tyrannical Austrian governor, Gessler, had decreed that his hat be placed high upon a pole as a symbol of Austria's supreme sovereignty.

When the defiant Tell refused to bow before the hat the furious Gessler forced him to prove his marksmanship by attempting to shoot with his crossbow an apple from his son's head.

Tell succeeded – but having prepared a second arrow for Gessler's heart in case his first shot had failed, he was promptly

arrested and put on a boat bound for Gessler's castle.

During the stormy crossing of the lake Tell was able to escape by making a mighty leap ashore, and then subsequently shot Gessler dead in an ambush – a deed that was to spark off popular revolt against the power-hungry Habsburgs.

For many years the Swiss accepted this tale of Tell without question. Indeed, it was considered almost an act of treason to cast even the slightest doubt upon it.

But then in 1760 it was challenged by a studious and sceptical Bernese clergyman, who dared to suggest that the Tell story had in fact been filched from foreign folklore. He published a pamphlet showing that a Danish legend – recorded as far back as the early 13th century – was suspiciously similar to the Tell episode.

In the Danish version the hero was called Toko. Like Tell he is also supposed to have shot an apple from his son's head, keeping a second arrow in reserve in case the first had missed its aim.

Toko, however, got away from his captors on skis, whereas Tell leapt shore from a storm-battered boat.

Predictably the parson's pamphlet was not at all appreciated in Tell's "home" territory of central Switzerland, and the outraged authorities there had copies of the publication burned in public by the local executioner.

The Tell legend was given a new and romantic lease of life when the German writer Friedrich Schiller dramatised it in 1804. His "Wilhelm Tell" became compulsory reading in many Swiss schools, with



Was it really just a tall Tell tale?

luckless pupils having to learn great chunks of it by heart. In some schools pupils are required to see it performed at least once.

The play is also a favourite source of quotations with which to heighten the emotional impact of countless patriotic speeches made all over Switzerland on August 1 – Swiss National Day.

One of the most outspoken critics of the Tell story is no less an authority than Professor Marcel Beck, Professor of History at Zurich University for the past 32 years (and a former Swiss Member of Parliament).

Professor Beck argues that although Tell is supposed to have lived around the end of the 13th century, his story was not put down in writing until nearly 200 years later.

Pointing out that the period is otherwise well documented, Professor Beck believes that if Tell was half the man he was reputed to have been then some chronicle or ancient document would certainly have mentioned him.

From his extensive research, Professor Beck also concludes that the citizens of central Switzerland, far from being bitter enemies of the Habsburgs,

were in fact on relatively good terms with their rulers at the end of the 13th century.

Some historians share the beliefs of Professor Beck, while other researchers of repute have repeatedly attempted to win back a place in history for the mighty marksman of Bürglen.

And so Tell has remained a controversial character to this day. But one thing is certain. Whether man or myth, he continues to symbolise not only the passionate love of liberty of

the Swiss but has also become a spiritual example for the oppressed and under-privileged far beyond the borders of his own country.

And whether in fact or fantasy, the tale of Tell the tyrant-killer is certain to survive. Generations of yet unborn Swiss schoolchildren will be able to recite from memory long extracts from Schiller's powerful prose. Thousands of spectators will continue to watch the impressive open-air performances of his drama at Altdorf and

Interlaken.

Nobody seems the slightest concerned by the fact that when he wrote his great work, Schiller had in fact never even set foot in Switzerland. Or by the fact that when the Bürglen Museum opened its doors in 1966, a nationwide hunt for a living William Tell produced only a single namesake. A taxi-driver – from West Germany.

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