

Origin and Impact of the William Tell Myth

Hardly any theme of Swiss history has been as popular as what is known as the "Story of Confederate Liberation", involving Tell, the Rütli Oath and the Burgenbruch (Storming of the Austrian nobility's castles). Time and again, the question has been raised as to whether all these people ever really lived and whether all these events ever really took place. Sources from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries contain nothing to this effect. The first written record of the story of the founding of the Confederation can be traced to the Bernese chronicle by Konrad Justinger, which did not appear until around 1420. This source does not mention William Tell, but views the insurrection by the three forest cantons as legitimate resistance to the Hapsburg Tyranny.¹ The first fully developed version of the story of liberation was set down in *Das Weisse Buch von Sarnen* (White Book of Sarnen), a volume compiled at a time between 1470 and 1472, in which the alliances and other contracts entered into by the canton of Obwalden are registered. Besides this documentary section, the "White Book" contains a report on the history of the Confederation from its beginnings to the time when the book was written. It includes stories that tell of oppressed country folk meeting on the Rütli Meadow, of the oath they took there, of the expulsion of the Hapsburg governors, and of Tell's deeds. The author, a country scribe by

the name of Hans Schriber, was probably taking down an earlier version, since, until then, the story had been disseminated orally.² Another documentation of Tell's existence is the *Lied von der Entstehung der Eidgenossenschaft* (Song of the Founding of the Confederacy). This song, composed in 1477, incorporates another, separate song about Tell that was worked into it at a later date.³ The two earliest versions of the Tell story have in common that Tell, upon entering the town of Altdorf, failed to pay tribute to a hat—belonging to the Hapsburg governor, Gessler—that had been raised high atop a pole, at which point Gessler forced Tell to take up his crossbow and shoot an apple from his own son's head. Once he had successfully completed the deed, Tell was asked why there was a second arrow in his quiver. The marksman answered that, had he struck his child, he would have shot Gessler with the second arrow; whereupon the governor had him arrested. Gessler was crossing the Lake of Lucerne with his train and his quarry when Tell managed to get away by leaping up onto a flat rock. A short while later, he killed Gessler in an ambush along the Hohle Gasse, a roadway near Küssnacht.

The tale of the master marksman who was obliged to shoot an apple, or another small object, from the head of his child, or of another close relation, is a theme that



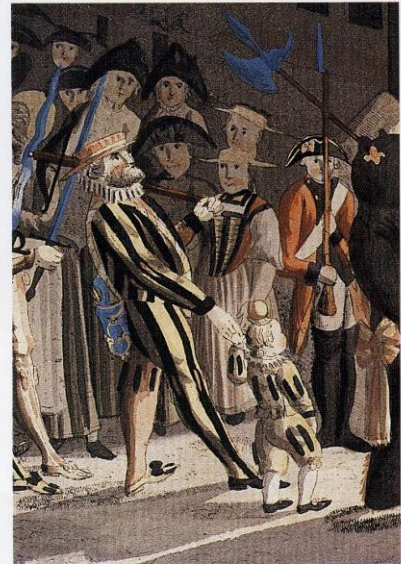
Procession portraying Tell and his son, put on by the *Äusseren Stände* of the City and Republic of Bern. Etching by Johann Jakob Lutz, circa 1788-90. (35.3 x 61.2 cm / 13.9 x 24.1 in.) LM 66299; Dias + 8571, + 8572.

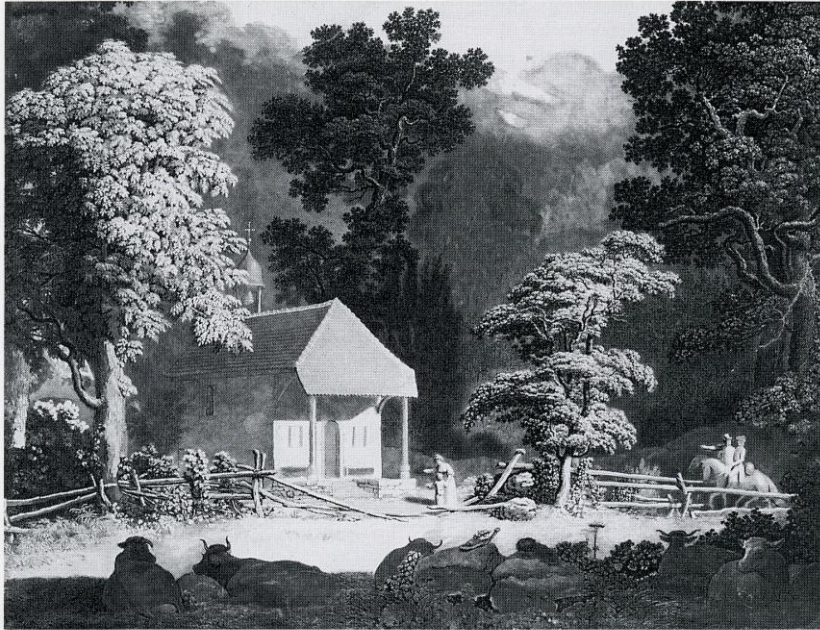
On Easter Monday, political life in Bern would climax in a series of festival processions. Especially popular was that given by a group of the *Äusseren Stände*. In this group, an organization of patrician youth would create a simulated government that imitated the structures and functions of the *Innere Stände*, i.e. of the government and administration of the Bernese Republic.

had already occurred earlier, in many Nordic sagas.⁴ But other traditional stories involving the founding of the Confederacy (e.g. the *Burgenbruch*) also appear in widely circulated tales and sagas. Indeed, modern historians have many doubts as to the historical foundation of the traditional tale of the founding of the Swiss Confederacy. It is generally agreed that these stories do not speak of events that occurred around 1300; they are more properly concerned with an historical image of the creation of the Confederacy that crystallized during the course of the fifteenth century. In this period of fierce clashes with the nobility, the story of the founding offered the people of that time a clear and simple idea of the beginning of the Confederation, in which townspeople and farmers play a main role in an uprising against the wantonness of the nobles. Moreover, this historical image justified current insurrection against the tyrannical arbitrariness with which the nobility ruled.⁵

Since the sixteenth century, the chronicles; more importantly, the Tell song and what is known as the *Urner Tellenspiel* (Tell-play from the canton of Uri) [probably performed for the first time in Altdorf

during the winter of 1512-13], as well as other traditional Tell plays have made the story of Swiss liberation famous. By the time of the Reformation, they had already become standard literature within the Confederacy.⁶ During the course of the sixteenth century, the story of the founding grew to be a central element of the confederate self-image and William Tell became known as the embodiment of fighting freedom. After the religious division of the Confederacy, Tell, the Confederate Triumvirate, Winkelried, and Niklaus von Flüe were seen as models representing the unity that had been achieved by their ancestors; this, at least, within educated and political elite circles.⁷ Apart from these unifying aspects, however, there is an element of social criticism in the Tell story. This first became evident in the second half of the sixteenth century, when, during incidents of social unrest, protest leaders repeatedly presented themselves as disciples of William Tell. The most easily recognizable of these im-





Mezzotint by Henri Courvoisier-Voisin depicting the *Tellskapelle* (Tell Chapel) at *Hohle Gasse*, circa 1800. (27.7 x 32.8 cm / 10.9 x 12.9 in.) LM 55651; Dia + 8573.

itations of Tell and his life were those that appeared during the Swiss Peasants' War, in 1653, during which an attempt upon the life of a municipal counselor from Lucerne was a deliberate reenactment of Tell's deed in the Hohle Gasse. From the point of view of the oligarchy, these were obviously false Tells. According to the political elite, Tell was one of the most valiant heroes of the past—he freed the members of the Confederacy from a foreign yoke. They saw him as a symbolic exponent of unity of the Confederacy and as a moral paragon warning against the decline in the tradition of virtuous ideals.⁸

By the end of the eighteenth century, the Tell story had outgrown its geographical context, as Europe's eighteenth century fascination with the Alps and with the Swiss led to the educated Bourgeoisie's

learning the story of Confederate liberation.⁹ Towards the end of the century, within the context of the French Revolution, a Tell cult arose. It placed the Swiss hero on a par with the Roman Brutus: Both were celebrated as tyrannicides and fighters in the forefront in the struggle for freedom and equality. The two-fold nimbus Tell had acquired became increasingly more important after 1792. On the one hand, since Tell was seen as a tyrannicide, he legitimized the execution of Louis XVI, on the other hand, he was a symbolic figure since he had risen up against Hapsburg Austria (i.e. the same enemy that now led the anti-revolutionaries).¹⁰

Inspired by the French Revolution, the Helvetic Republic considered Tell to be its ideal symbol. He became the leading figure in Helvetic Doctrine, as the two largest political movements of the time

Drawing by Ludwig Vogel,
1816. (19.8 x
12.3 cm / 7.8 x 4.8 in.)
LM 28357; Dia + 8574.

On May 2, 1816, Ludwig Vogel attended a production of the Tell story in Boswil. He sketched Tell answering Gessler's question as to the meaning of the second arrow.

could be condensed in his person: Thus, revolution and national integration were brought together in a single, clearly understandable image.¹¹ On the other hand, there was another aspect to the interpretation of Tell: he was the most recognizable symbol of hostility towards the French and a representative of the opposition, in whose eyes both the French occupation of

Switzerland and the dominance of the Helvetic Government were seen as new acts of tyranny.¹²

On March 17, 1804, in Weimar a play that would elevate the Swiss bowman to a world famous figure and universal symbol of freedom was performed for the first time. The play was Friedrich Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*. Schiller took his material partly from Aegidius Tschudi's *Chronicon Helveticum*—which had been written in the sixteenth century but did not appear in print until the eighteenth century—and partly from Johannes von Müller's monumental work *Geschichten schweizerischer Eidgenossenschaft* (History of the Swiss Confederation).¹³

Schiller's drama, which soon thereafter became required reading in elementary schools, effectively stamped Tell's image onto the mind of nineteenth century Switzerland.¹⁴ It also marked the point at which the increasingly mythical character of Swiss History crystallized. Historical or historically assessed events and figures were elevated to the status of timeless national validity.¹⁵ This literary exaltation of the mythology of liberation had an integrating effect, which reached its zenith at the time of Nazi Germany. During this time, the Swiss perceived Germany to be a threat to their existence, and Tell and the other heroic figures strengthened their will to defend their independence.¹⁶ In more recent times, the importance of legends about the founding of the Confederacy and of stories of Tell has shrunk into insignificance in the face of a newly arisen national identity crisis. A critical examination of the status of William Tell reveals that the heroic bowman of Uri has now been reduced to an item of commercialized folklore.

