

The reputation of William Tell abroad

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1971)**

Heft 1625

PDF erstellt am: **28.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689422>

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The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER

The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

Vol. 57 No. 1625

FRIDAY, 8th OCTOBER, 1971

THE REPUTATION OF WILLIAM TELL ABROAD

The August issue of the monthly cultural magazine "Du" was almost entirely devoted to the legend of William Tell abroad. This remarkable piece of research was accomplished with the aid of an American photographer of Swiss descent, Mrs. Willi Stunzi, taken by an enthusiasm for Wilhelm Tell. During years of patient research she assembled a collection of photographs of works of art on the theme of Wilhelm Tell, and assessed that the William Tell cult almost enjoyed more popularity abroad than it did at home.

It was the Swiss themselves who carried the Tell legend beyond the frontiers of their own country. The first Frenchman to record his story was a Franciscan monk named André Thévet who published a biographical lexicon in 1584 portraying Tell as a kind of Roman legionary and representing his life and deeds with much imagination.

Tell was brought on to the stage on many occasions thereafter. In 1766 Lemierre's "Tell" was staged at the Comédie Française for the first time. It was well received by the public and was revived innumerable times before and after the Revolution. The memory of William Tell was not without political impact and his glorious example was called upon in the National Assembly of 1790 in justification of contemporary action. During the Reign of Terror he ceased to be a chronologically remote legend and became an imperative figure whose existence was denied at the risk of one's life.

Relying on the 16th century Chronicles of Aegidius Tschudi and Johannes Muller, Friedrich Schiller wrote his gushy and romantic "Wilhelm Tell" in 1804. This five-act drama has been described as a "dramatised gospel of patriotism, a hymn in praise of freedom and the rights of man" and continues to be a major success in German theatres.

The theme having been popularised by Schiller, Rossini picked it up and wrote his scenically most ambi-

tious opera. Although he was a fast composer and like Mozart wrote his scores at breath-taking speed, he laboured for a full six months before he completed his "Tell". The magnitude of his subject had gripped him and the massed scenes and the declamatory solos by Tell demanded a greater intensity than anything he had previously attempted in the opera seria field.

The first night at the Paris Opera on August 3, 1829, was the event of the season. But the lukewarm applause at the close was not up to Rossini's expectation. The opera-goers had come hoping to wallow in floods of their Rossini melody and this unaccustomed stuff, particularly those parts of the composition that were novel and futuristic, acted like a cold douche on the Parisians.

On May 11, 1825, the first performance of the play "William Tell" by James Sheridan Knowles (not Richard Sheridan, but still an artist much thought-of at the time) was presented at the Drury Lane Theatre in London. The title role was taken by one of the greatest actors of the period, William MacReady.

It is probably on the American stage that the Swiss national hero made his most frequent appearance. The estimated 275,000 Swiss emigrants who contributed to populate North America since 1600 are not unrelated to this. A town called Tell City, in Perry County, Indiana, was founded in 1857. An operatic version of the Tell legend called "The Archers or the Mountaineers of Switzerland" was staged by William Dunlap, a native from New Jersey, as early as the 18th century. Besides Schiller's and Knowles' works, Grétry's Tell opera and a Tell opera by Henry Rowley Bishop were produced in America. Schiller's "Wilhelm Tell" has been presented annually in German and in English in the town of New Glarus, Wisconsin, since 1938.

Hollywood has not forgotten to make use of William Tell and television series have cemented his fame. The

American Sunshine Corporation with a cast from the Zurich Stadttheater made a film on the origins of the Swiss Confederation in 1924, with shooting taking place on location. In 1934 Universal International devoted a cartoon to William Tell.

William Tell has also left his print on painting and decorative arts. There are countless examples of medallions, vases, figurines, plates, engravings and paintings with scenes taken from his legend. Some are at the Tell museum in Bürglen, others are in museums and private collections across Europe. Even a Japanese scroll has been discovered with the apple-and-the-crossbow scene. The first representation of Tell was in fact commissioned to the Flemish painter Biset in 1672 by the Antwerp Crossbowmen for their Assembly Hall. In the main, the legend of William Tell has found the most fertile ground in Germany and America. It is harder to find its traces in Italy and Austria.

An explanation would be that most of the countries deprived of a sizeable Tell iconography have their own national legend. The French have Joan of Ark, the Italians Garibaldi, the Austrians have Andreas Hofer (and there is no reason why they should have a good remembrance of Tell, anyway) whereas the Germans have purely legendary characters such as Siegfried, which is less satisfactory.

The French, it should be stated, made good political use of William Tell, even though his legend had less cultural impact than in Germany. The Spanish Republicans used him to their political advantage and a brochure portraying him as a revolutionary hero was published under their auspices.

Finally, it should be pointed out that several ships have carried the name "William Tell". Of the 17 French ships involved in the Battle of the Nile in 1798, all but two were burnt down by Nelson, and one of the surviving vessels was the three-masted "Guillame Tell".