In Search of William Tell

Seven hundred years ago, William Tell shot an arrow through an apple on his son's head and launched the struggle for Swiss independence. Or did he?

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In the center of the town square stands a heroic bronze figure, a stern, sturdy, bearded man in homespun clothes, crossbow over his shoulder, his arm around a barefooted boy. Before him stands another stern, sturdy man, this one in a neat business suit, respectfully silent, with his arm around another small boy, this one wearing Reebok running shoes. The man points to the ground. "This," he tells the boy, "is the spot."

The boy nods. He knows what spot this is: the birthplace of their country. He knows that the bronze statue is of William Tell, who with one shot of his crossbow started the centurieslong series of events that turned a few isolated settlements of poor, backward medieval mountaineers into the prosperous modern nation of Switzerland. He has heard the story of William Tell at his bedside and in the classroom. He has seen it on television and in comic books and acted out at country fairs and in school theatricals. He knows that here, many hundreds of years ago—in a.d. 1307, according to the statue's inscription— Tell, a local farmer and famous hunter, came striding with his son through the market square of Altdorf, then as now the only town of any size in the canton of Uri.

In the center of the town square those many years ago, bailiff Gessler, agent of the Hapsburg duke of Austria, placed a Hapsburg hat on a pole and, to the blare of trumpets, announced that all passersby must uncover their heads before it. But William Tell of Uri kept his hat on his head. He was promptly dragged before Gessler, who ordered an apple placed on the head of Tell's son and told the farmer that if he failed to shoot it off with a single arrow at a distance of 120 paces, both he and the boy would be put to death.

Tell paced off the distance, loaded and aimed his crossbow, shot his arrow, and the apple fell. “Your life is now safe,” Gessler said to him, “but kindly tell me why I saw you putting a second arrow inside your jacket?”

“If my first arrow had killed my son,” Tell answered, “I would have shot the second at you, and I would not have missed.”

Enraged, Gessler ordered Tell bound, carried down to LakeLucerne and thrown on a boat that would take him to a dungeon in the grim castle of Küssnacht. There, he declared, “You will never more see sun or moon.”

Today, the square in Altdorf where all this took place is the first stop in a pilgrimage that takes contemporary Swiss fathers and sons, not to mention thousands of tourists of many nationalities, to the chapel built on the site of Tell’s home in the village of Bürglen, then on to the landing where Gessler and his prisoner set off on the treacherous waters of Lake Lucerne. Next, a few miles to the east, visitors come to a spot on the lake’s south shore where a steep path descends to a flat rock by the water’s edge known as Tellsplatte—Tell’s ledge. It was here that Tell, released from his bonds when a violent wind sprang up and he was the only man aboard with the strength to bring the boat to safety, steered close to the rock, leapt ashore and, with a mighty kick, sent Gessler and his crew back into the waves.

Calculating that the men would somehow reach shore, Tell made his way 20 miles through dark forests and over mountain passes to the Hohle Gasse (narrow pass), a sunken road leading to Küssnacht. There he hid behind a tree, waited for Gessler and shot him dead with that famous second arrow. Finally, modern pilgrims return to the lake, to a bank on the shore opposite Tell’s ledge. Here, after killing Gessler, Tell met in a forest meadow, known today as Rütli, with three other men from neighboring cantons who had been wronged by the bailiff or by other hired hands of the Hapsburgs. The four swore an oath, which Swiss boys know by heart: “To assist each other with aid and every counsel and every favor, with person and goods, with might and main, against one and all, who may inflict on them any violence, molestation or injury, or may plot any evil against their persons or goods.” Then orders were given for mountaintop bonfires to signal the start of a war of national liberation and the destruction of castles like Gessler’s, built by the Austrians to awe the natives.

Tell's story is cherished by the Swiss and central to their sense of origins—witness the image of Tell's crossbow stamped on every item of export that passes Switzerland's borders, as proof that it is truly made in Switzerland. The tale's popular celebration continues undimmed: this summer, for example, a special festival in and around Altdorf marks the 200th anniversary of the première of German dramatist Friedrich von Schiller's *William Tell*, a box office smash (directed on its opening night in March 1804 by Schiller's friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe) that spread Tell's inspirational story far and wide.

There is just one small problem: many historians doubt that Tell ever made those two famous arrow shots in 1307, and many are convinced that no such person as William Tell ever existed.

For one thing, his story wasn't set down fully until 1569- 70, some 250 years after the events it describes, by historian Aegidius Tschudi, who, among other things, got his dates wrong. In 1758, nearly two centuries after Tschudi's death, up turned a forgotten copy of the original Oath of Rütli made by the representatives of the three forest cantons, none of whom was named Tell. It was dated "the beginning of August 1291," so the whole episode had to be moved back 16 years (only Uri remains stubbornly faithful to the old date of 1307). Swiss Independence Day, established officially in 1891, is now celebrated with bonfires on August 1.

Also in the mid-18th century, a Bernese scholar named Gottlieb de Haller read, in an old history of Denmark, a tale involving King Harald Bluetooth, who reigned from 936 to 987, and a Viking chieftain named Toko. One drunken evening Toko boasted that he could do anything with his bow and arrow; he could even shoot an apple off a pike at the other end of the hall. "Good," said the king. "I will now place an apple on the head of your little son and you will shoot it off." There was no arguing with a king, so Toko took up his weapon, told the boy to look the other way and shot off the apple. When the king inquired why he had two more arrows inside his vest, Toko replied, "To kill you, sire, had I killed my son."

Bluetooth took the answer as perfectly normal for a Viking and forgot all about it. But Toko was not a man to forget or forgive and eventually joined the young crown prince Sweyn Forkbeard in revolt against his father. In the course of battle, he came across Bluetooth relieving himself behind a bush and put an arrow through his heart.

De Haller's subsequent book, *William Tell: a Danish Fable*, provoked outrage in Switzerland. There was a court action, a copy of the book was publicly burned in the Altdorf square once dominated by the tyrant's hat, and the author might have been set ablaze himself had he not made abject apologies, saying it was all just a literary exercise, not meant to be taken seriously.

But the door was now wide open for skeptics, and other scholars rushed in. They discovered there had been no organized uprising in the forest cantons after the Oath of Rütli, that the castles had been sacked either well before or well after 1291, and that, in fact, there was no documentary evidence that a man named William Tell had ever lived, let alone shot an apple off anyone's head. They concluded that Tell was a fictional character based on muddled memories or ancient legend. The most recent comprehensive history of Switzerland— a thousand-page tome published in 1988 in French, Italian and German—dismisses Tell in just 20 lines. (Even so, a bronze statue of a heroic Tell graces the book's cover.)

Jean-François Bergier, a former professor of history at Zürich's Swiss Federal Institute of Technology and author of what many consider the best Tell biography, *Guillaume Tell*, concedes that the apple story was likely imported from Scandinavia. But he insists that something very important did happen in the mountains of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden (the latter now split into Obwalden and Nidwalden) around the beginning of the 14th century. There, in a remarkable break with the past, was established the principle that a people could revolt against a great power and constitute themselves as a self-governing entity. And the Swiss federation founded at Rütli, or someplace like Rütli, in 1291 (or 1307) is still going strong after 700 years.

History did unquestionably turn around in those obscure gorges, although exactly how remains a matter of speculation and debate. The ancestors of the inhabitants of these forest cantons—among them Celts, Teutons, Helvetians, Burgundians— had come, in distant centuries, eastward or westward over the great plateaus north of the Alps in search of richer lands to cultivate or to loot, or in hopes of escaping the law. They pushed their way up the narrow Alpine valleys till they came up against sheer rock walls and settled down.

They lived in splendid isolation. Forced to cooperate among themselves, they elected officials at assemblies of landowners. As in mountain communities everywhere, they

were bound by a common devotion to their own long-settled ways, and they presented a united front against foreigners on the other side of their mountains.

It all began to change, though, with the climatic warming trend that started around a.d. 1000. As the snow line receded, there was more pastureland and there were more cows to sell. The mountain men began looking for wider markets and found them just over the Alps in Italy. The St. Gotthard pass leading south was easy to navigate, but an impassable gorge blocked access from the north. Sometime in the mid-13th century, somebody—perhaps the men of Uri, who had learned to build sturdy houses on impossibly steep slopes—stretched a bridge across the gorge, changing the economic map of Europe. The St. Gotthard now offered the most convenient route between northern Europe and Italy, and all who traveled that way had to take a three-day journey through Uri, paying the men of the canton for food, shelter and the use of their mules.

But even as Uri was becoming more prosperous, it was torn by internal strife. In desperation, the community appealed, in 1257, to a neighboring nobleman, Count Rudolph von Hapsburg, to settle a feud among warring clans. Only too happy to oblige, Count Rudolph came with a glittering retinue, settled matters between the feuding clans and began poking his nose into everyone's business. Since his underlings wore the arms of the Hapsburgs and had soldiers to back them up, they soon came to feel that they owned the place. The people resisted, first sullenly, then violently.

Still, more than 20 years passed after the Oath of Rütli before the Hapsburgs bothered to send an actual army to bring the insolent peasants to their senses and 60 years before they sent a second one. Each time, they came in great force, and each time they let themselves get caught in unfavorable terrain, where their gaudily armored knights were mowed down by the stolid, fierce mountaineers hurling boulders and wielding their pikes, battle-axes and crossbows.

It was enough to shake the world: a handful of rustic louts putting to rout one of the great powers of Europe. In time, more and more cantons, including those surrounding the thriving cities of Zürich, Bern and Basel, joined the confederation that came eventually to be known as Switzerland (a name derived from the little canton of Schwyz). No wonder the Swiss were proud of their exploits, and no wonder they listened eagerly to songs and stories about the courageous ancestors who had first won their freedom.

Above all, they listened to the story of a man named Tell, also known as Thall or Thaell or Tellen—the Wilhelm was added later—who had boldly kept his hat on in the square of Altdorf. Bergier speculates that the tale might have evolved thusly: a band of Danish pilgrims on their way to Rome might have been in an inn one night, listening to old favorite stories like the one about Bluetooth and Toko. Men of Uri might have been drinking there too, catching the drift of the tale about the apple on the little boy's head.

An apple on the head of a child! Here was the luminous detail that lit up for the simplest soul what life was like under the capricious cruelty of a foreign tyrant. Here was a story that perfectly illustrated how a stubborn, solitary man could stand up and fight back. The next time these men felt like passing on to their neighbors or their children the ever-popular, ever-evolving tale of Tell, it was easy to slip in the apple, which soon became the center of the parable and made Tell a living symbol of the national character: independent, capable, not to be pushed around.

Bergier sees Tell as a father figure the Swiss have created for themselves over the centuries, "a point of reference, unspoken but always present, to which the Swiss constantly attach themselves and in which they recognize themselves." As when a farmer in Altdorf, explaining the fierce opposition of the people of Uri to Daylight Saving Time, told me bluntly, "We live on Wilhelm Tell time."

The Swiss turn instinctively to Tell whenever they feel their country is in danger. In the past four centuries, they have had three civil wars, and in each of them both sides marched under the banner of William Tell. He inspired them in the dark days of World War II, when they were surrounded by the armies of a madman who regarded Switzerland as part of the German Reich.

In turn, Tell's influence and example have extended far beyond the nation's borders. Moved in part by his fight against their shared enemy the Hapsburgs, French revolutionaries named a street after him in Paris at about the same time they were beheading Queen Marie Antoinette, who had been born a Hapsburg princess. Schiller's play helped to stoke the fires of European liberalism and, later in the 19th century, provided an important symbol for the founding of Germany. When Rossini's 1829 opera *William Tell* was first produced at La Scala in Milan, the city was still part of the Hapsburg Empire, so the setting was changed discreetly to Scotland, and Tell and his son appeared wearing kilts. When the Nazis took power in Germany, casting themselves

as the liberators of ethnic Germans in other lands, they made a movie glorifying Tell, with the mistress of Hermann Goering in a leading role. But when those same Nazis began invading other countries a few years later, Tell's story of liberation sent the wrong message, and they banned the production of any theatrical work about the Swiss hero, not least Schiller's play.

Movies and television spread the Tell legend further and wider still. In 1940, Hollywood produced an animated cartoon titled *Popeye Meets William Tell*, in which Popeye plays the son and has a can of spinach shot off his head. And for nearly 20 years, beginning in 1935, Rossini's heroic *William Tell* Overture introduced "The Lone Ranger," first on radio and later on television.

Perhaps the question of whether a man named William Tell actually lived in Uri 700 years ago is no more material than the question of whether a masked Lone Ranger actually roamed the Old West righting wrongs. If it is impossible to prove that Tell existed, it is equally impossible to prove that he didn't. Nobody can be sure if a man called Tell or Thall or Thaell or Tellen dared to disrespect the hat of a Hapsburg that day in 1291 or 1307. But for hundreds of years—and even today—anyone who takes a stand against thugs from the other side of the mountain can be sure that the spirit of William Tell stands with him.