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Autor: Wey, Alain
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William Tell: a symbol of hope

Tell, a citizen of the world? Our national legend has crossed borders and oceans to become a symbol of freedom and resistance, and even nationalism. A short voyage around the world with our famous archer. By Alain Wey

Whether legend or fact, the debate on the authenticity of William Tell is always a heated one. But this has not stopped our neighbours from appropriating our national symbol for their own purposes in times of crisis. Thanks to the meticulous work of Geneva historian Alfred Berchtold (80), we can now discover how our freedom-fighter has found his way around the world.

Tell: citizen of the world

William Tell is not only a European but also a citizen of the world. The tale of an heroic archer can be found from Persia to Scandinavia, long before the legend of William Tell. At some point in time it reached Switzerland, and the hero became Swiss at a key moment in our history. His story dovetails neatly with the history of the Confederation. The archer became a political figure after killing the tyrant. He was turned into a great freedom fighter of the likes of Brutus, with whom he is often compared. His story dates back to 1307, although the first written account appeared 170 years later. Tell crosses the linguistic border and can be found towards

the end of the 16th century in Geneva, and a little later in France, where his tale was spread by Swiss mercenaries. Visitors to Switzerland, among them the English, came across the legend and took it with them. Finally he is to be found in texts, songs and paintings in France, Germany, Italy, Belgium and Russia, even before Friedrich Schiller immortalised him in his play. During the French revolution Tell was a role model for countless revolutionaries. And from England he crossed the Atlantic to serve the young American republic.

European classic

After Schiller's play was performed in Weimar in 1804, the story was widely disseminated and William Tell became an instant European classic. This was the time of Napoleon's campaigns. Tell became a symbol of resistance in Germany, inspiring many leading writers and being cited as an example ahead of many battles. Alfred Berchtold points to two main interpretations of the play: on the one hand, the nationalistic interpretation (Franco-German war of 1870, First World War and the start of the

Hitler era); and on the other hand the idea of Tell as a freedom fighter who opposed despotism and was often held up as a figurehead to incite uprisings against suppression. But adventurous exploits are often subject to revisionism. Hitler, for example, cited Tell in "Mein Kampf" yet in 1941 prohibited any mention of Tell in schools and theatres, since by then he had come to see the play as the dangerous glorification of a "terrorist".

Since people are always interested in Schiller in times of crisis, new translations and critiques increasingly appeared in countries where revolutions and freedom fights were raging: Hungary, Romania, Poland, Turkey, China and Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam. When Swiss began emigrating to other continents they spread Tell's fame. His tale is known even in Chile and Argentina.

Over and above the symbol of freedom, Alfred Berchtold (and here he agrees with historian Jean-François Bergier), believes that the "most resonant image of Tell" is one of "hope; a symbol of hope in times of oppression." In other words: "Doubt not!"

Guillaume Tell, résistant et citoyen du monde, Alfred Berchtold, Editions Zoé, 2004
(William Tell, Resistance Fighter and Citizen of the World, Alfred Berchtold, Editions Zoé, 2004)



Variations on Wilhelm Tell: Monument in Altdorf, Ferdinand Hodlers painting, Tell drama on the Rütli.