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The Adventures of William Tell

UK TV series : 1957 : dir. : I.T.C : 39 x 25 min
prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:

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Conrad Philips; Jennifer Jayne; Willoughby Goddard; Nigel Greene; Michael Caine (guest)

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Tell & Son train their crossbows on the wardrobe department Source: The Golden Age of Children's Television

Halliwell's Television Companion review: |

"The legendary Swiss folk hero defeats the evil Gessler. Or: Robin Hood in the Alps. A location-filmed series with more than a spark of vitality."

The Golden Age of Children's Tele-vision comment:

"...Meanwhile, over in Switzerland, local lad William Tell was the only man brave enough to stand up to the outsize Austrian governor Landburgher Gessler. His reward for such defiance was his own TV series. **"The Adventures of William Tell"** starred Conrad Phillips in the title role, with Jennifer Jayne as Mrs Tell, Nigel Greene as Tell's burly pal The Bear, and Willoughby Goddard as the evil Gessler.

The Landburgher's diet would have reduced Rosemary Conley to tears. He made Henry VIII look anorexic. But because of his liking for the odd whole venison, he lacked Tell's agility and had to entrust his capture to his guards, usually with a loud splutter of "Get Tell!". Unfortunately for Gessler, I suspect his dozy guards were distant cousins of the Sheriff of Nottingham's men.

Conrad Phillips recalls some "hairy moments" during filming. "I was always getting my knuckles slashed in sword fights and once ended up playing Tell from a wheelchair after I broke my ankle in a fall. The crossbow replicas we used were pretty lethal too - they were always shooting off their bolts unexpectedly. But the worst time was when I was sitting on a horse with a rope around my neck tied to a beam and my hands behind my back. They wanted me to have my hands bound with rope, but I had an instinct about the whole thing and just held them behind my back. It was as well that I did because the horse suddenly galloped away. As it was, I managed to cling to the beam with my free hands, but if they had been tied I would have been hanged."

One episode featured a young Michael Caine as a prisoner, complete with ball and chain. Any hopes Caine had of an exotic location on **"William Tell"** were dashed when he found that his scenes were to be shot at a quarry near Watford. And all the mountain scenes were filmed in Snowdonia.

Phillips had been a gunner in the navy during the war. "So I had a good eye for hitting things. But I didn't fire the bolt which split the apple on the head of Tell's son Walter each week. That was done by trick photography. We used a very fine taut wire through the apple and lined it up with the shot of the bolt speeding towards him. If we had tried it for real, I think we would have got through a lot of boys..." "

Radio Times retrospective note:

"Conrad Phillips starred as the Swiss folk hero in **"The Adventures of William Tell"** from 1958. The series also featured a young Michael Caine as a convict. Sadly, the action sequences have left their mark on 65-year old Phillips, who now walks with the aid of a stick.

"When we were filming **'William Tell'** in North Wales, I skidded on an icy rock and damaged my knees. I soldiered on for years but in 1990 I had operations to give me two new knees. It makes walking difficult so I have virtually retired from acting. But if somebody offers me a part in a bed or in a wheelchair, that's fine!"

He and his wife of 28 years, Jennifer (they have two grown-up daughters, Sarah and Kate) moved from Wiltshire to Normandy five years ago. "I love life here. It's simple and rural. But far from getting away from actors, we found that our nearest neighbour is Edward Hardwicke, who played Dr Watson in **'THE ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES'**. It's a small world."

[no listing in "History of Television", "How Sweet It Was", "Into the Box of Delights - a History of Children's Television", "Television's Greatest Hits" or "25 Years of ITV - 1955-1980"]

I watched this series in early childhood, so the only fragments from it I still remember are: the huge alpenhorn which opened the titles - sung to the William Tell Overture of course; the novelty of the hand-cranked crossbow against the familiar longbow of Richard Greene as Robin Hood; and the gross, sneering arch-villain Gessler. Tell's son Walter had only a slight role in the proceedings, doubtless yielding to capture and rescue many times, and although the business with the apple probably featured in the very first episode, I don't recall it.

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