

From Anzac Cove to Hollywood

THE CAREER OF TOM SKEYHILL

Jeff Brownrigg profiles the colourful life of a soldier, songsmith, raconteur and sometime confidence trickster

Among the gimlet spires of hilltop churches and more substantial public buildings in Hamilton, Victoria, young Tom Skeyhill first fancied that he might become a poet. In adolescence he imagined ways of fast-tracking his life, propelling himself from what were likely to be modest circumstances—perhaps as a labourer in his father's cordial factory—to a position of wealthy renown.

It's not clear exactly how he thought this could be achieved, although he dreamed that literature would provide the magic carpet. Like most people of that time, he left school at 14. He joined the Post Office as a telegram boy and was quickly promoted to the position of clerk. This was a short-lived advancement however, because he absconded with some of the Post Office's money in order to sample the high life at the nearby coastal town of Portland.

When this money ran out, he was again faced with the prospect of finding something to do. The choice he made shaped his future: he decided to feign injury. As the west wind off the Bight raked through the tussocks, he was discovered wandering in coastal sand dunes apparently unable to speak or hear. Soon the 'injured



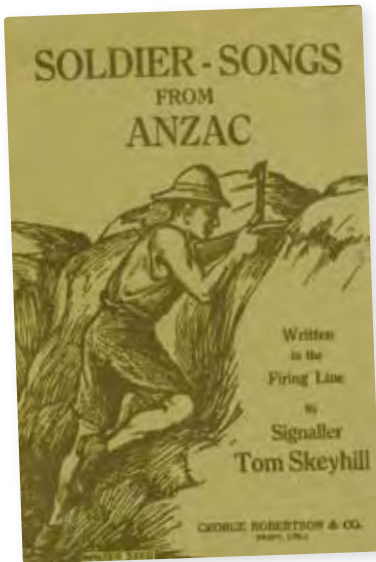
lad' was safely rehabilitated and back in the bosom of his family. He remained there until two suspicious youths pricked him out of silence with a pin.

In 1914, Skeyhill responded to the national call, joining the 8th Battalion of the Australian Imperial Force and landing at Gallipoli on 25 April. He claimed that, once ashore, he began to write poetry, eventually producing *Soldier-Songs from Anzac (Written in the Firing Line)*. Seven of the 50 000 copies that sold between 1915 and 1917 have found their way into the

above:
Promotional poster for Tom Skeyhill's appearance in Albury, 28 January 1916, announcing his 'eloquent, thrilling, awe-inspiring' lecture
Courtesy Skeyhill/Maloney family

left:
E.G. Amos
Hamilton Post Office, 1901
albumen photograph; 11.0 x 15.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an21310847





above:
Walter Seed
Cover illustration from *Soldier-Songs from Anzac: Written in the Firing Line*, by Signaller Tom Skeyhill (3rd edn) (Melbourne: George Robertson & Company, 1916)

below left:
Souvenir program from Tom Skeyhill's lectures at the Tivoli Theatre, Melbourne, 1916
Courtesy Skeyhill family

below right:
Souvenir program from Tom Skeyhill's lectures at the Tivoli Roof Garden Theatre, Brisbane, probably July 1916
Courtesy Skeyhill family

National Library's collection. *Soldier Songs* was a small but influential book, written in the comfortable vernacular now associated with C.J. Dennis. Skeyhill's verses, 'My Little Wet Home in the Trench'—which can be sung to the tune of 'My Little Grey Home in the West'—and 'Me Brother Wot Stayed at 'Ome' were very popular during the Great War.

These works sang about the privations of modern (or any other) warfare, and of the misery of trench life. The following words were, Skeyhill stated, written at Anzac Cove just four days after the first landing.

Bully beef and hard biscuits we chew;
It seems years since we tasted a stew;
Shell crackle and scare,
But no place can compare
With my little wet home in the trench.

Nine days later, while waiting in reserve at Cape Helles, he turned his attention to those who had not answered their country's call.

'E reads in the mornin' papers,
That the Turks are on the run;
Then 'e brags about Australia,
And wot 'er boys 'ave done.
'E shines before the barmaids,
'E's good at beery skitin',
But round the corner of the street
Is where 'e does 'is fightin'.
'Is dugout's in the tap-room,
The bar's 'is firin' zone
And the billiard-cue's 'is rifle,
Me Brother Wot Stayed at 'Ome.

Early in May 1915, the 8th Battalion was to move to the tip of Cape Helles with other Australian, French, Indian and New Zealand troops. They were to storm a tiny village, Krithia, and capture high ground with a commanding view of the Narrows. On 8 May, after three days waiting, the battalion was finally ordered to fix bayonets and walk across open ground into the deadly fire of entrenched Turkish machine guns.

On that day, during a truncated naval bombardment that was supposed to clear the way, Skeyhill claimed that a shell 'landed at his feet' and exploded. Although





Your friend
Tom Skeyhill



his war record reveals that he was repatriated for an ambiguous foot injury.

The pair soon developed a modus operandi whereby they performed a long

left:
Unknown photographer
Signed Portrait of Tom Skeyhill
c.1916
reproduced from *A Singing Soldier*,
by Signaller Tom Skeyhill
(New York: The Knickerbocker Press,
1919)

right:
Unknown photographer and source
Bobby Pearce
Courtesy Skeyhill family

apparently blinded, he had no actual signs of physical injury. With field dressings quickly fixed over his eyes, he was taken to an evacuation point and was soon on a hospital ship heading for Alexandria. The *Braemar Castle* carried 850 seriously injured soldiers and only two doctors, so Skeyhill quietly awaited attention. In Egypt, he adopted close-fitting goggles with smoked-glass lenses and a cane. In this condition he was shipped home to Australia.

Once back in Melbourne and out of the army, Skeyhill signed up with the Tivoli Circuit, to make profit of his war experience. Having assembled 200 glass magic lantern slides of the Gallipoli landing he began extensive tours of the eastern states. His lectures were popular, and his poems sold well. He was accompanied by another veteran of the Anzac Cove landing, Bobby Pearce, a somewhat lugubrious baritone who added what seemed to be unimpeachable authority to the act. On the Tivoli Circuit and in newspaper publicity, Pearce claimed to have four bullet wounds in the groin, though

evening presentation for their own coffers, followed up with a Sunday afternoon event for the Red Cross. Skeyhill also busied himself creating pictures to add to his collection of magic lantern slides. A newspaper reproduction of one purportedly shows him at work on a poem 'in the firing line', but in fact it appears to be a studio photograph, with the signaller posed against a painted backdrop. The tales were convincing enough, however, to stir Australian sympathy. At the Assembly Hall in Melbourne in 1916, Skeyhill and Pearce were even introduced to the audience by a former Prime Minister, the ailing Alfred Deakin.

By 1917, tiring of their Australian work, and with the real cost of the war becoming increasingly obvious at home, as the casualties mounted, Skeyhill sailed to the United States of America. He arrived in San Francisco, and was taken up by the forces that created an American push to join the European War—sweeping him onto the Liberty War Bond lecture circuit. Illustrated talks given in Australia were easily adaptable

Unknown photographer
Tom Skeyhill dressed in Russian
garb. Many of the images that
purport to be Tom in actual
uniform are in fact concocted
for his theatricals
reproduced from *Table Talk*,
10 March 1921
(Melbourne: Maurice Brodzky,
1921)



the Russian Revolution. He told spellbound Australian audiences already convinced of his own heroism that he had entered Russia across a frozen Finnish lake disguised as a Swedish merchant. There he had consulted with 'the leaders of the Revolution'.

In his hometown of Hamilton, he announced that he would establish a great research library in the Mechanics' Institute. His vision was to establish an Australian national library that would reflect his international, intellectual leadership. The corpus of its collection would be his own books, all of them duly annotated.

to the new conditions. Before the war ended, Tom was telling regional America that thousands died in the water at Anzac Cove on that first morning, the sea stained with their blood as far as the eye could see.

In America, Skeyhill also seized an opportunity to rid himself of his blindness, later claiming that Theodore Roosevelt's personal trusted physician had manipulated the 'shell damaged' neck vertebrae. Skeyhill was a sensation: in 1918, American papers reported that he raised a million-dollars-a-minute for the United States war effort during his 23-minute presentation to well-heeled opera buffs at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.

Even after hostilities ceased in November 1918, the war remained a central pillar of Skeyhill's American celebrity on the Chautauqua/Lyceum lecture circuit. In the 1920s, he began telling Americans that when the war broke out he had been at Oxford, studying poetry and world affairs. He had travelled, he said, with British forces to the Mediterranean. In 1924, he claimed that it was there, on the Greek island of Skyros, that he had cradled a dying friend, Rupert Brooke, in his arms.

In 1921, Skeyhill made a return visit to Australia. He arrived on the *Tahiti* on 21 September, undertaking a series of tours, and lecturing, in particular, on Lenin and

He offered advice about the standing of each book—sometimes a perspective on the tome's history, but most often a short critique written in his inelegant hand on an endpaper. When, in the middle of 1922, the first consignment of his books arrived, there were more than a dozen volumes on Russia.

There is no doubt that Skeyhill's lectures were compelling, even if over the years his own 'wounds' proliferated, and were used as an excuse to mask bouts of alcoholic indulgence. Erratic behaviour on the lecture platform he put down to his need for morphine.

Skeyhill had continuing success until 1927, when an 'incident' in a hotel in Augusta, Georgia, saw a falling out with the Chautauqua/Lyceum management, ending an important phase of his career. He would go on pursuing his writing and literary reputation, however—applying his skills as a raconteur and confidence trickster to new pursuits and projects (to be the subject of a future story in *National Library of Australia News*).

JEFF BROWNRIGG is a Canberra-based researcher and writer