

From Anzac Cove to Hollywood

ALVIN C. YORK'S ROLE IN THE CAREER OF TOM SKEYHILL



into Kentucky—that is, until he found religion.

York was also a crack shot with the sort of muzzle-loading rifle that would have been familiar to Crockett and Boone. But in the years before World War I, with religious guidance, he had become a pacifist. He was only talked into joining the army in 1917 with an appeal that included the idea that fighting Germans was doing God's work.

York first met the Australian Tom Skeyhill in 1919, during

left:

Unknown photographer
Portrait of Tom Skeyhill, c.1925
Courtesy Skeyhill/Maloney family

below:

Unknown artist
*One and Only One Stood His
Ground—Corporal Alvin York*
reproduced from *Sergeant York: Last
of the Long Hunters* by Tom Skeyhill
(Philadelphia: John C. Winston
Company, 1930)

Jeff Brownrigg continues his profile of the colourful life of a soldier, songsmith, raconteur and sometime confidence trickster

Alvin C. York was the United States of America's most decorated war hero. Recently his achievements have been reappraised under the unforgiving spotlight of academic scrutiny and reduced to a more human scale. But, in 1918, it was claimed that he had single-handedly 'taken out' 35 machine guns and captured several hundred Germans.

York hailed from the Valley of the Three Forks of the Wolf, in Fentress County in the Cumberland Mountains—once the home of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. He enjoyed a drunken, roistering youth, and a ruckus in Tennessee might have seen him avoid retribution by stepping over the state line





above left:
Unknown photographer
*Sergeant Alvin C. York,
America's One Man Army*
reproduced from *Sergeant York:
Last of the Long Hunters* by
Tom Skeyhill
(Philadelphia: John C. Winston
Company, 1930)

above right:
Unknown photographer
Sergeant Alvin C. York
reproduced from *Sergeant York:
His Own Life Story and War
Diary*, edited by Tom Skeyhill
(New York: Doubleday, Doran
and Company Inc., 1928)

the period when Skeyhill was lecturing in America on the Chautauqua/Lyceum circuit, regaling audiences with his stories of derring-do in Gallipoli and elsewhere (see *National Library of Australia News*, August 2007). York must have stayed in Tom Skeyhill's mind because, in 1926 on a trip to Kentucky, Skeyhill visited the still famous York at home and convinced him to write his war diaries and reminiscences.

In effect, Skeyhill concocted the words for situations that York might have recalled. York had resisted overtures before, but, under pressure to find ways of financing education projects in the backwoods, he relented. It is now impossible to judge how much, if any, of the words in *Sergeant York* (1928) were actually those of York himself. As one who understood the value of propaganda together with the rewards of spinning a good yarn, Skeyhill comprehensively supported, perhaps even partly created, York as an American hero. Skeyhill melded his Australian Anzac stories with an apple-pie American tale, creating a legend.

In his formative years in his hometown of Hamilton, Victoria, Skeyhill imagined that he would become an internationally significant poet. More than this, he dreamed of becoming a wordsmith of the highest order—in the same way that Shakespeare had established his early reputation through

poetry, but whose great dramatic works became the main output of his maturity. Skeyhill would emulate the Bard. Fired by the publication of two volumes of verse and encouraged by the similarity between his highly charged public speaking on the lecture circuit and an actor's passionate soliloquies, he felt sure that he was destined for the theatre. On the endpaper of a book Skeyhill donated in 1922 to Hamilton for the great research library he had proposed, he wrote:

I use Barrie and John Goldsworthy as models. I have written and torn up six plays—all to develop my art. And now I am having my seventh attempt produced on Broadway in New York City. It is a psychic [sic] satire in four acts with a prologue and epilogue. I have written each act twelve times. *God how I have worked at it.*

He began to claim the authorship of plays at the time his appeal on the Chautauqua circuit was beginning to wane. His play, *Moon Madness*, he said, would premier in 1926. He made a similar claim towards the end of 1927, when he went as far as inviting management from the Chautauqua/Lyceum Chicago Bureau to the first night of *The Unknown*. Tom knew that all of the senior executives would be on the other side of the continent and unable to take up his invitation. He simply needed to create a semblance of an opening night.

In fact, a play by W. Somerset Maugham called *The Unknown* (written in 1920) had recently appeared in theatres in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. With breathtaking simplicity, Skeyhill was able to adapt reviews of *this* play for his own use, making critiques of the play appear to be about his own work. In a letter, again to the Chautauqua/Lyceum managers, he even cited a review by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle which, if genuine, was presumably about the Somerset Maugham play: 'His "Unknown" is a work of genius—a phrase not to be lightly used'.

Making sure that he covered as many bases as he could, Tom Skeyhill had befriended Jessie Bonstelle who ran the Bonstelle Playhouse in Detroit. One of Jessie's actor-employees was the young and beautiful Marie Adels who had worked in the David Belasco Company. Belasco's plays were both popular and traversed contemporary subjects. (Today, if his name is mentioned at all, it is likely to be as the author of the plays adapted by Italian librettists for Puccini's music, particularly *Madame Butterfly* and *The Girl of the Golden West*.) Tom and Marie had a child, Joyce, and while they gave the appearance of being married, they do not seem to have formalised the arrangement.

From time to time in the late 1920s, Skeyhill crops up in the regular program news at the Bonstelle theatre and anybody casually reading Bonstelle programs might form an opinion that Tom's relationship with the Playhouse was a professional one; even that he was a playwright. Tom was a master of subterfuge. He invited managers of his lecture tours to openings of his plays at

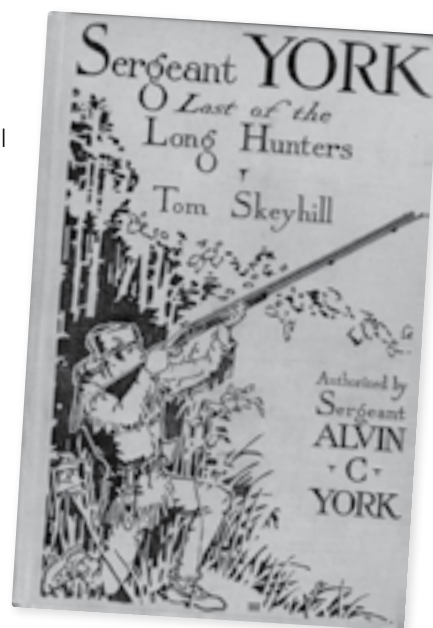
the Bonstelle Playhouse on nights he was certain they would be in California.

While his letters speak of several new dramas, none has been found in manuscript or published form and there are no records of performances in Detroit, Chicago or New York. His third and fourth plays were, he said—wasting no time on lengthy titles—called *The Interloper* and *The Orchid*. In fact, programs for evenings he claimed were for premieres in particular theatres, show that, on those nights, plays by other authors were presented.

Regardless of his rich, and perhaps rather anxious, fantasy life, there was a steady source of income provided by his two books about Sergeant York. In 1930, he had written a children's book *Sergeant York: Last of the Long Hunters* to follow his first book about York. It has not been out of print and is still considered a valuable text for 'home schooling'.

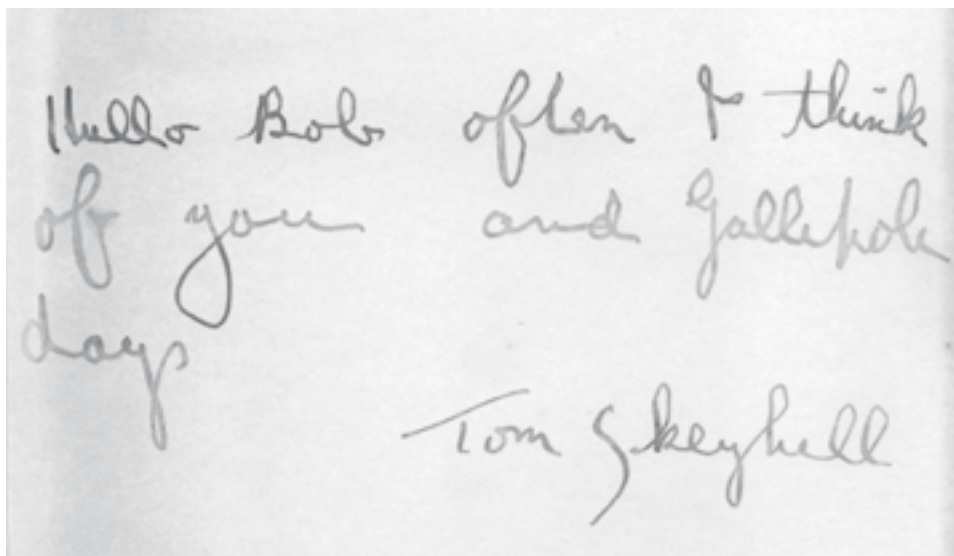
With life moving towards his imagined success, Tom bought a summerhouse near Hyannis Port and it was there, while showing off in his own aircraft, that he clipped some trees and crashed. Although his injuries at first appeared slight—a broken leg—he died the following day, 22 May 1932, of a pulmonary embolism. Two others in the plane with him survived the wreck, sustaining only scratches and bruises.

Tom was buried at West Dennis Cemetery with attention from the American returned



above:
Cover of *Sergeant York: Last of the Long Hunters* by Tom Skeyhill (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1930)

below:
Dedication by Tom Skeyhill reproduced from *Sergeant York: Last of the Long Hunters* by Tom Skeyhill (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1930)





Gary Cooper as Alvin C. York in Warner Bros' 1941 movie, *Sergeant York* reproduced from *Sergeant York* by Sam K. Cowan (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1922, 1941)

soldiers (the Cape Cod American Legion), but he still lacks the Australian headstone to which he is, I think, entitled.

It was not quite the end. Jesse Lasky, a Hollywood entrepreneur of mythological proportions, pursued Alvin C. York for a decade, trying to secure the film rights to York's story. Marie Adels seems to have negotiated some form of copyright arrangement so that the film could be made mostly from Skeyhill's record of York's life at home and at war.

After years of importuning, by 1939 Lasky had convinced Warner Brothers to do the picture. Howard Hawks directed and gained his only Oscar nomination for his trouble. Gary Cooper won an Oscar for best actor with his rumbustious, and then penitent, York. Walter Brennan was also nominated for best supporting actor. On the eve of World War II, it was a film that had to be made: an unambiguous story of bravery and triumph over evil.

Cinema spoke a fitting epilogue. Tom's public life had been tremendously theatrical and he had built changing images of himself to suit changing times. At various

times, he was damaged child, wounded soldier, published poet, campaigner for the rights of youth, biographer, futurist, and commentator on world affairs conveying first-hand experiences of the places where the action was. He successfully convinced many others that he was a significant emergent dramatist.

Successful ruse bred further successful ruse until he was able to largely detach himself from reality, even while whole communities thought him credible. He celebrated life itself, 'quickness' in antiquated parlance, and he did this with undeniable energy, establishing a place for himself in the annals of Australia and the Great War. Although he cannot be counted amongst the most upright of our military, literary and oratorical forebears, Tom Skeyhill remains an engaging, substantial presence in our national rogue's gallery.

JEFF BROWNRIGG is a Canberra-based researcher and writer