

## Writing *The Story of Billy Young*

Anthony Hill

It was Bill Young's remarkably vivid memories of growing up in Ultimo during the Depression years, and the resourcefulness that gave him during his incarceration as a teenage prisoner-of-war in some of the worst Japanese jails, that attracted me to write his story.

Bill was in his eighties when I interviewed him for my book *The Story of Billy Young*. And the word pictures he conjured up of working-class life in those troubled times, struck me as utterly authentic and redolent of an Australia that has now almost gone...

Barrowmen down at Paddy's Market struggling to make every penny count ... trying every trick to avoid the coppers ... families being evicted from church houses along Bulwara Road and Billy's communist father cadging food to give to them ... camped out in a vacant lot, or painting political slogans from the bridge down near the Powerhouse...

These things live now only for a generation that is fast disappearing, and it seemed to me important to record them for posterity. Besides, as an historical novelist they provided all kinds of rich counterpoint when imagining the kid living on barely starvation rations as a POW in a lice-infested cell. Under such circumstances, memories of food are everything...

Going down to Arnott's with a pillow case to collect broken biscuits. Coming home with a billy can of milk from the Harris Street dairy (skimmed milk, because it was cheaper). Ice cream and lollies on the back of a truck, having sold off a load of less-than-fresh fish one Easter. Buttered Madeira cake. Iced Chester cake. Irish stew steaming from the pot on Ma's stove...

Bill's mother left the family when he was very young, and he lived with his father, Big Bill Young, in a succession of boarding houses in and around Bulwara Road run by a market couple, Ma and Pop Jepson. Big Bill was later to be killed fighting for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. And it's the characters that come in and out of his son's life that bring the period so much to life...

A one-armed ex-Serviceman called 'Wingy' who sold home-made clothes props, pegs and skinned rabbits door-to-door. Ma's superstitious friend, Millie, a circus performer in another life, who tried to cut her throat in a fit of despair during the Depression. The boy next door who impaled himself on the cast iron fence railings, when he jumped over the first-floor balcony during a police raid...

Life, for many such people, was lived with one foot on either side of the law. And while those outside the neighbourhood clan could be taken for mugs, the bonds of

loyalty were strong enough inside it. Ma lending her rent receipts to friends who needed to convince a landlord they were trustworthy tenants. The boy Billy out with the fruit barrow keeping nit for any policeman on the beat. Picking wild boronia (quite illegally) to sell for a penny a bunch at the market. And seeing how Pop could palm-off a counterfeit coin, acquired during the day's trade, to somebody else...

In such ways did the child learn the resilience and disdain for authority that would be so important to his survival as a teenager in a POW camp. Smuggling a pencil and a few scrap pages into his cell to make a pack of cards, when this was strictly forbidden – and Ma, in imagination, laughing and winking at him from the shadows.

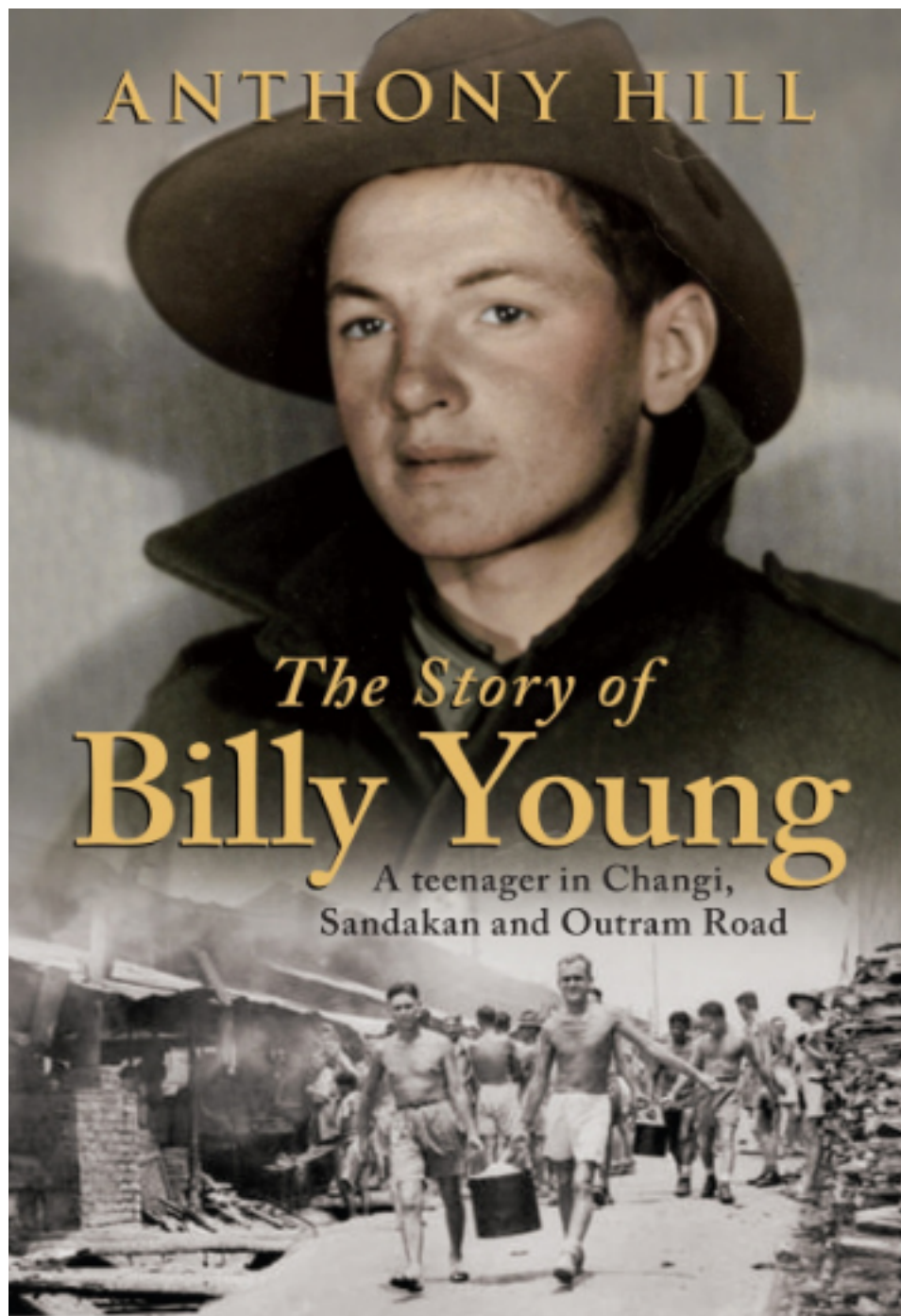
But there was also the life of the mind. A love of remembering poetry scratched on a cell wall and the drama of a good story, not only helped the young prisoner keep his sanity during the interminable hours of solitary confinement. Reading, and an artistic talent that developed for writing his own verse and painting his wartime experience, enabled Bill Young to survive the demons that returned, as they always do, in later years.

These resources, too, had their genesis in Ultimo. The truant inspectors tried to hound an education into the boy. The school teachers sought to beat it in with canes. His father attempted force-feeding with Communist Party propaganda. All without success.

It wasn't until one Saturday morning, out with the fruit barrow, that an old lady in black offered Billy a piece of cake, a glass of lemonade, and a copy of her grown-up son's old *Triumph* magazine for boys – and he finally found something worth reading. Thereafter, she gave him another magazine almost every week.

He has never forgotten her. And the image of the ten-year-old boy, sitting with the canvas blind lifted on the upstairs verandah sleep-out of his rundown tenement house (no doubt worth a fortune these days), reading his stories by the light of the only street lamp, is an enduring one.

From an education acquired through his love of reading; self-discipline instilled by his wartime comrades-in-arms; and a sensibility directed into his poetry and painting, Billy Young overcame both the horrors of war and the pains of peace. Not a bad life-story, worth writing – indeed an object lesson to us all – for one who began life as a bare-foot market scamp on the streets of Ultimo in the dark days of the Great Depression.



Published by Penguin Books in 2012, copies of *The Story of Billy Young* can be bought for \$23 from bookshops or the author at [www.anthonhillbooks.com](http://www.anthonhillbooks.com)