Hawthorn Sketches - Life in the Valley, by Geraldine McFarlane.

# Bill Aylen

For most of his life Bill Aylen was an "unskilled" labourer, a misnomer certainly for the wealth of experience his work reveals. He changed jobs often, picking up new skills rapidly as he adjusted to the work, and always meeting the challenge of staying employed. For in the 'good old days' - ('there's no such thing , says Aylen) - with long hours to work and no allowance for health and unemployment, a man lived by his wits and adaptability. And, it was up to you then, to stay in work. Aylen disapproves of the dole. He thinks it's a great mistake and prevents young people wanting to go and look for work. His story reveals the courage and tenacity needed by a working man in those days.

William Alfred James Aylen was born at 26 Kelvin Grove (now Station Street) in 1905, the third child in a family of eight. His father, Edward Arthur, riveted china and mended umbrellas; he rented a series of shops in Burwood Road and at one stage he had one of the pair in front of Balloch's bakery in Burwood Road; Aylen remembers the big oven at the back of the premises. He also remembers being poor. 'Nobody had anything then. Everybody was poor unless somebody left them something.' The family moved often, just keeping ahead of ever-rising rents. Bill remembers sleeping three to a bed with his brothers.

School, at Auburn State, was a testing experience. He didn't really mind the lessons and he learned to write well but the strap was used often and he resented it. One day, while waiting for punishment in the Headmaster's room, he refused to take his pants down, 'I jumped out the window, dropped out, about six feet down into the sand ....We had a teacher who was that bad that my eldest brother took time off from work. He was going to come up and belt him but the teacher got away early so he didn't get belted.' Children could get the strap in those days for 'talking, or you'd get whacked if you didn't hold the pen *that* way and write properly. They taught you well but they were very strict.'

Bill longed for revenge on this teacher and for escape. 'I wasn't sick of school. I was sick of the bombastic attitude of the teachers. In fact... later on, I was down at the baths one day with a couple of friends and this teacher was down there, I was eighteen, I played football, I was strong. This teacher was blasting off at the kids, so when I walked past, I said, "Still at it, bouncing the kids?' ... He spluttered, he was getting into this kid. Then he walked over to me. The roles had been reversed. Instead of me being frightened by him, he was frightened of me. I would have pushed him in the baths, but my mate with me said, "Look they'll have the police before you get out of the baths." So I didn't.'

But he escaped - at eleven and a half - into the serious world of work. His parents altered his birth certificate, 'put a blot on the figures' to make him officially fourteen, and he went down to Kennon's tannery in Richmond as a strainer. He didn't mind, 'you either went to work and had a feed, or stayed at school and starved'. It was a long walk, about two miles, and he left home at 6.45 a.m. for the 7.30 start. 'It was always cold and your boots would be leaking.' The long day was broken by a lunch of a milk loaf and butter, but there was nowhere to eat it. You just found yourself the best dry spot you could in the shed and sat down there. He was home again by about six at night. He earned thirteen shillings a week. "I gave twelve shillings to my Mum and I had one." He used to go to the pictures on his share; he loved a serial called *The Hooded Terror*.

However, the spell at Kennon's ended when a truant officer discovered him and he was sacked. He went back to school for a brief time and then left again, using the altered birth certificate to get another job, this time with Herbert Burgess at the tannery in Connell Street, Hawthorn. He was a strainer again, tacking out calf and goat skins. But the truant officer caught him for the second time.

This time he didn't go back to school but got a job at Campbell's woodyard in Burwood Road, near William Street. Here, "I chopped the wood and weighed the wood and loaded the wagons. We also sold charcoal for the charcoal irons - irons that ironed the clothes. We used to sell it in bags for sixpence. People would light the fire inside the iron and close it up and iron the clothes. You always had a fire so you put red hot embers in it.' That job was in 1918, in the 'flu epidemic.* People 'used to walk around with masks on. They cost you I/6, at the chemist's.' Campbell died of it. He was about forty-one. Aylen didn't catch the flu, 'I was too skinny and tough,' he says.

He went back to Burgess when he was fourteen. "They asked me to come back ... I stayed there till I got put off at eighteen because

they had to pay me higher wages.' He was in the straining-room again. There was no holiday pay, no Christmas pay. You'd get put off before then. You didn't get Christmas Day or New Year's Day. Most of the places closed down. They closed down so they didn't have to pay holidays .. ..There was no such thing as sick pay. If you stayed away, you didn't get paid. So no one stayed away.'

The offices of the tannery were in Connell Street. It was a single-fronted building about three or four storeys high, built of bricks at the bottom and wood higher up. Along Connell Street there were about fifteen to twenty feet of the brick frontage and then a tin fence and a gate. This was the entrance for carts bringing in fresh skins and taking away waste, and there was a shed about twenty yards inside the entrance for storing the skins. Behind this were the toilets, 'three toilets for about sixty men,' and then, the tanning pits, running down in a row towards a concrete drain, which ran right through the tannery. There were sheds built over this drain. The waste from the tannery pits ran into it, 'not all the time - mostly, when it was raining, in flood. They'd empty the pits in then, when they couldn't get booked'. The contents of the pits- manure, lime and chemicals- were then poured into the drain as it continued down Denham Street, past the Hawthorn Station and into the Yarra at Wallen Road. The drain was mostly dry, however, and Bill Aylen and his friends coming to work down Burwood Road often used to get into it at Lynch Street and walk down.

The Burgess men, Herbert and his two sons, Harold and Ralph, worked at the tannery. Herbert Burgess was known as the ghost. 'He used to come around in a white coat. That's why they called him the ghost ....Someone would come down and say. "Look out, the ghost's about. He was an Englishman, upper class you'd call him. His son Ralph was the chemist. They had nice motor cars.' Ralph had a Bentley. Harold was an amateur wrestler and Bill Aylen was delighted when once, in a competition, he was beaten by a man from the tannery. It was us and them,' he says.

At eighteen, when he was put off, he worked on a poultry farm that his uncle ran at Tooronga. His uncle had several hundred birds. There was 'very little money and a lot of work.' From this time, until 1939, he had a variety of unskilled jobs either working on building sites or for the Hawthorn Council doing pick and shovel work. One variation was a return to Kennon's in 1935. This time he worked at the lime pits, stirring the solution with a long hooked stick. He also worked an unhairing machine which removed the hair from hides after it had been loosened by soaking in the lime. Unlike Burgess's, Kennon's used to sell the hair to hat factories.

During this part of this life, he weathered the Depression. You'd get one day a week, or a fortnight, from the Council at 12/6 a day. Sometimes he got contract work. Once, 'they were putting a barrel drain down under a footpath in Park Street, and they had plenty of fellows doing pick and shovel work. The foreman was walking up and down. Any time you'd see the foreman (you'd ask) "Any vacancies?" I'd been hanging around there for a while and one day he said to me, "There's a fellow leaving. Do you want the job?" I said, "Yes." So he said, "We start in the morning at half-past seven." So in I started and I don't think I lifted my back for three hours and I stood up. I hadn't worked for a long while. "Oh my back's sore" and he yelled out, "Hey Bill, don't you want the job?'"

He will never forget the Depression: people looking through rubbish bins for food, and a yearly handout of boots ('the fellow who gave them out, you'd think he paid for them'). He moved around looking for work. There was rabbit trapping near Pakenham, Yarra Junction and Sunbury, for sixpence a pair, and potato digging at Catani, near Koo-Wee-Rup. The pickers lived in sheds with hessian slides and slept on rough bush beds. Six forked sticks were driven into the ground, wooden stakes placed in the forks to make a frame, and potato sacks were stretched over this.

Sometimes, 'we used to walk down to Albert Park and go swimming when there was no work. Leave home early in the morning and come home late at night. You made your own fun. There was nothing else to do because you couldn't afford to go to the pictures all the time.' And, I started doing crosswords in the Depression, in the *Herald.* I learnt that much out of crosswords. I couldn't estimate how much I learnt out of crosswords.' He made lists of words, memorising the ones he had missed and wanted to remember.

In 1939, he was working as a builder's labourer when the foreman at Burgess sent him a message. There was a permanent job going if he wanted it. Aylen did not like working in 'lousy, rotten stinking' tanneries, but the promise of permanency was enticing and he went. He was to work on a converted shaving machine, thinning out the leather. All went well for ten days. Then the blades of the machine got stuck on an uneven patch of the leather and cut the top and middle joints off two of his fingers. It didn't seem to hurt but Aylen remembers the consternation. *I* remember in the office, Herbert, I think it was - the old bloke -"Who can tell me what happened, who can tell me what happened? Get the man an aspirin", but there was no damn tap, I couldn't take it.' He collected thirty shillings a week to live on for six weeks and a lump sum compensation of £97/I0/- (In those days, compensation for the toss of a whole finger was £60. Bill received £37/I0/- for the first joint cut off and £II/I5/- for the second - a total

of £48/I5/- per finger.) When he finally got back to work, he worked for a fortnight and was then put off. '"Not enough work", they said.' It was the day before he got married.

During World War 2 he worked at the Newport workshops, on Bren gun carriers, operating a drilling machine. He didn't want to join the armed forces then and he says he wouldn't have gone to the previous war even if he had been old enough. 'I'm a live coward,' he comments, 'cemeteries are full of dead heroes'.

He remembers the period of World War I. 'They told you how wonderful it would be', but this wasn't so. The soldiers who came back from the war 'were promised everything but got nothing. War service has little to offer the working man.' His brother, Teddy, joined up. 'He just got in. He was born in 1900.' Teddy came back with the bubonic plague. They quarantined him on Torrens Island' (Near Port Adelaide, South Australia). 'He got over it - very few got over it - because he was a strong young man. They gave him two shillings a week pension. He was going to tell them to keep it but my uncle told him to take it... establish himself ....It took about forty years to get a full pension.'

In 1949, he joined the P.M.G. as a postman and the most stable part of his working life began. He was a postman for ten years and then worked in various branches of the department, ending up as Clerical Assistant, Grade 4, a position of which he is extremely proud. He became a precis clerk, shortening memos, 'that came in from England and various other departments.' He was able to retire with superannuation at sixty-five

*Bill Aylen delivering mail in Hawthorn, 1950*

Bill Aylen is a firm believer in unionism. He has been a member of the Tanners', Municipal Workers', Builders' Labourers' and the P.M.G. unions. He thinks that workers should contribute to any organisation which tries to improve their conditions. But he has little faith in politicians. In the past he understood politics - or thought he did. "My father said to me, and I think he was right, if you took your coat off, you voted Labor - otherwise you made up your own mind. I think that's right. But there's no difference now between political parties, let's face it. It's only that the unions can bring a little pressure on the Labor Party. They can't bring any pressure on the Liberal party, that's the only difference. If you're a Labor man and you make a statement, the Liberals rubbish you -oppose it. If you're a Liberal and you make a statement Labor'll oppose it. That's all opposition is. I voted Labor all my life. I'm not ashamed of it.' But he is cynical about Labor politicians in Canberra, who earn high salaries and wear expensive suits.

In the old days people made their own fun. "You'd go to parties. You walked wherever you went. Everyone had to do something at a party, sing, dance, something like that. I always used to recite, "The bee sat on the wall, That is all." There was very little trouble with parties - in your own suburb, of course, because it was a bit dangerous to go to other suburbs. They always had mobs. You had the Flying Angels at Albert Park, they'd kick you to death. You had the Hungry 42 at Richmond. We were Hawthorn boys and if we met a Richmond girl, it was all right if she came over to Hawthorn. But if we went over there and the mob saw you - if she was a Richmond girl and you were from Hawthorn - you were gone.' Bill Aylen's wife, Marjorie, was born in Richmond and moved to Hawthorn when she was ten. She remembers that her relatives thought the family was going to a 'classy' suburb. It didn't seem so to them. 'It was an ordinary working place.'

It was once put to Bill Aylen that a working man's children had the same opportunities in Hawthorn as the children of people who could afford to let them complete their education at private schools. He does not agree. His son was in the Hawthorn Swimming Club team with a boy who went to Scotch College. 'A lady said, "You are fortunate. Your son has the same chances as Mr ... 's son." I said, "My son has got to work eight hours a day. Mr... 's son, nice and all that as he is, only goes to school and half the time he's training. My son has to train early in the morning and late at night and work during the day."'

He has two regrets. The first is that he has never touched alcohol. 'If I had my time again I'd have had a social drink occasionally. I might have got more information about jobs at social gatherings.' His second regret is his education. He wishes he had spent longer at school. He feels that he lacks method, though he enjoys working with figures and can usually get the right answer to problems.

'He's a battler' says his wife, 'he has always had to be. "You've got to bluff your way through,' he says. And 'necessity is the mother of invention. Kids today, if they don't have the right tool, they can't do (the job) whereas, when I was young, you'd manufacture it - or use some other method.' What made him so tenacious? Perhaps there's a hint of the answer when he is asked about his heroes. 'Cazaly, of course, even though I lived in Hawthorn', he answers and then quietly, as an afterthought, '... I barrack for me - me and mine'.