

# UNOBTRUSIVE ICONOCLAST

DAVID LOW: "A Nuisance Dedicated to Sanity"

[DAVID LOW, the New Zealander who has become such a great cartoonist, is well known to most of us for his drawings. His voice is also fairly well known to some of us, for he has spoken several times from the BBC (the most recent occasion was on October 15). But here is a pen-portrait of Low himself which may not be so familiar. It is by TOM DRIBERG, M.P., and was written for "The Leader."

THE self-portrait which occurs in so many of Low's cartoons—a startled impish little wisp of a man, obviously "Bohemian"—is misleading physically if not spiritually. Low is distinguished in the flesh by a mature, even sedate, toughness, and is of ample build; his appearance and clothes tend to the "hearty" rather than the picturesque; he has a jutting chin and a grizzled soldierly moustache.

(His beard he shaved off a few years back because people were apt to recognise him by it, and—when the war started making them interested in politics—to come up and talk to him. He disliked being "a marked man." Above all, he says, he's "for privacy").

In his physiognomy only the eyes may suggest the artist; while the thin and rakishly curved lower lip suits the man who has maintained for more than 20 years his status as Britain's most brilliant and, on occasion, most ruthless Radical cartoonist.

## Miracle in Fleet Street

The word "Radical" is scarcely necessary. A good cartoonist can hardly be a placid upholder of things as they are. He must have an agin'-the-government streak. This may be why Low's cartoons during the war, when he has been broadly in support of the Government's war effort, have been less frequently

caustic than during the pre-war years, when he bitterly ridiculed Chamberlain and his policies and evolved his celebrated Colonel Blimp.

Low's contract with his employer, Lord Beaverbrook, is one of the most envied permanent miracles of Fleet Street. He is almost the only Left-winger who has not "flaked away" from the Beaverbrook Press as the years have worn on and political crises have become more intense. This may be partly due to Beaverbrook's acumen, for Low is certainly the *Evening Standard's* most substantial attraction; it must be partly due also to the toughness already remarked in Low. He draws as he likes to draw; by contract he is specifically exempted from drawing in accordance with his employer's policy. (All through the Munich period his cartoons made nonsense of the views advocated in the ardently pro-Chamberlain editorials on the same page.)

Conversely, the editor of the *Standard* has the right to exclude altogether any cartoon that may seem to clash convincingly with the paper's policy; but this is a right that cannot well be exercised too often, since the customers expect their ration of cartoons (four a week is the average).

## £5 a Week Enough

Doubtless Low's contract is also lucrative. He must earn several thousands a

LOW:

A camera study by Karsh of Ottawa. Compare it with the self-portrait on the opposite page.



year. Probably he saves money. He has simple tastes. He likes a cigar—but a cheap one. He likes a cheap seat at the cinema. He could get along well enough on £5 a week. He has lived for a good many years in a comfortably middle-sized house at Golders Green. His main exercise is in the garden there—a bit of "spadework" most mornings; he indicates proudly to visitors the "darned good tomatoes coming on." In the garage are two cars, both still laid up. Most of his neighbours must by now have got used to the unobtrusive iconoclast in their midst. Certainly no private life could be less flamboyant. Low has just celebrated his silver wedding; ("got married 25 years ago," he says, "and lived happily ever after"). He has two daughters—

one a WAAF and an artist, one (politically minded) a B.Sc. and a Foreign Office researcher. So his own aptitudes have been divided neatly between his offspring.

## "Cracked About Drawing"

It was just before he married, a quarter of a century ago, that David Low came to London from Australia. By the beginning of this century, comic art in England had become effete. *Punch*—once sharply controversial—had lost its sting. Satire had been blunted by commercial expediency. Cartooning was for amusement only; there was no social urge behind it. But in Australia—far as it was from London and New York and obliged to produce its own newspaper entertainment and comment—conditions were in many respects more favourable to vigorous cartooning; and the precise opportunity for its development occurred in the foundation of the *Sydney Bulletin*. This was a highly political paper, and then (not now) strongly Radical; it was a focus of all the young talent and published every week four pages of cartoons and 20 or 30 smaller drawings. London made a fine plum-pudding for irreverent young Australians so trained.

Low was not an Australian, nor did he first learn his trade with the *Bulletin*. He was born at Dunedin, New Zealand, in 1891. The influence of his father, a chemist, may have inclined him early to public affairs; for his father was an omnivorous and inquiring reader, a Left-wing agnostic who veered (retaining his Leftism) towards Anglicanism, and indulged, over the head of the infant David, in agonised arguments on the nature of the Infinite.

Both his father and his mother drew a little, casually, but David Low was "cracked" about drawing, he says. He "drew all day long," feverishly, "sooner than go out and biff a ball about with the boys." He was one of five children;



LOW TELLS US A SECRET: How the first-class cartoonist works

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