

THE EARLY DRAWINGS OF DAVID LOW

IT IS FITTING that the Turnbull Library should be the repository of what is probably the most comprehensive collection in existence of the very early work of our world famous cartoonist, David Low.

This collection was recently discovered in a small bookshop in Ghuznee Street, Wellington, and purchased by the Librarian for a modest sum. It comprises about thirty drawings representative of all aspects of the artist's early efforts—caricatures, cartoons, joke blocks and even advertising drawings and at least one straight portrait. Many of the drawings are topical and nearly all were drawn while David Low was in his teens and still in this country. Taken in conjunction with biographical facts these pictures completely disprove the reiterated claim made in overseas journals that Low is an Australian. By the best of rights he is a New Zealander: he was born and educated here, his first drawing was published in Christchurch and his first pictures published overseas were drawn in New Zealand. I am convinced from a study of these early drawings that except for the brief and inevitable influence of a local idol, or of an international idol like Phil May, David Low was David Low from his very first drawing. He has remained so ever since. This is unique. You look at these early drawings and see in the elemental stage Low's acute powers of observation of men, moments and influences, his merciless wit and his unerring strength of line.

Although only one drawing in the collection is dated we are able to trace from the signature, style and printer's directions that they were nearly all done while the artist was still in his youth. It was obvious also that David Low did not have to learn to draw. It was simply a case of budding genius. Low stated in later life that the only drawing lessons he had ever received were at the Canterbury School of Art at about the age of eighteen. The instructions he said did him more harm than good. "Art schools," he remarked, "have a tendency to strip you of your original approach and to substitute a reverence for conventional technique." Looking at these early pictures I can see the force of this statement.