

Collection of David Low cartoons

Pictures Collection H87.14/1-31

Acquired 1987

In 1987, State Library Victoria was fortunate to acquire a collection of David Low's original pencil sketches and pen-and-brush cartoons.¹ Among the 31 items were a few drawn for New Zealand's *Canterbury Times* and Sydney's *Bulletin*, some jottings on scraps for later fashioning into caricatures of prominent notables of the day and, the highlight, six cartoons Low drew in Melbourne for his *The Billy Book*.² *The Billy Book* contains 35 pages of satirical drawings depicting William Morris Hughes, then prime minister of Australia, in various comical situations. Priced at 2/-, it reputedly sold around 60,000 copies – and it is recorded that 'Billy' Hughes was not amused.

From an early age the New Zealand-born David Low (1891–1963) set his sights firmly on the Sydney *Bulletin*. He regularly sent it copies of newspapers containing his cartoons; eventually the *Bulletin* responded to his constant mailings and Low crossed the Tasman to see what chance he had of working for that famous publication. Finally, in 1911, he secured a position working from Melbourne for six months. He shared a studio in the Olderfleet Chambers, Collins Street West, with another *Bulletin* contributor, Hal Gye, who himself was only a few years away from national fame for his delightful cherub drawings to accompany CJ Dennis's *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (1916).

Low sent copies of *The Billy Book* to London newspapers. This initiative resulted in an invitation to join the staff of the *Star*, and he sailed for London. He worked on several Fleet Street newspapers, earning a reputation as the dominant cartoonist in the Western world. In 1956 in his autobiography, Low expressed his forthright attitude to artists accepting knighthoods:

I could not think that critics or commentators ostensibly of satirised temper on public affairs should accept, like other men, the insignia of trammelling loyalties ... no conscientious satirist could be a 'King's man', with the implied restriction.³

However, in a curious change of heart, David Alexander Cecil Low accepted a knighthood in 1962. He died in England the following year, never again having seen his native country.

These early drawings, preserved by Low, were offered to the Library by Low's Cambridge-based daughters. Funds provided by the Friends of the Library facilitated their return (with the early New Zealand sketches) to the city in which they were drawn.



David Low, *The British Museum*, original pen, ink and pencil drawing, published in *The Billy Book*, Sydney: NSW Bookstall Co., 1918. Pictures Collection, H87.14/20