

# The Pencil Is Mightier

*YEARS OF WRATH, A Cartoon History: 1931-1945. By David Low with text by Quincy Howe. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 1946. \$3.75.*

Reviewed by S. J. WOOLF

**P**RESIDENT LINCOLN once said that Thomas Nast was his best recruiting sergeant. Although David Low's cartoons did not compete with compulsory military service in filling the ranks of the British Army, nevertheless they played as important a part in molding public opinion as did Nast's drawings during our own Civil War. Anyone who was in England or in France after the invasion soon found this out. They were the subjects of discussion in government offices as well as in parlors and pubs. And even a Tommy in Caen taking from his wallet a soiled copy of a cartoon of Colonel Blimp asked, "When will those blighters at home wake up?"

Now we have a welcome volume of drawings covering some fifteen years which amply justify Low's position as the world's most powerful cartoonist.

The work of this New Zealander, who coming to England as a young man soon made a name for himself, must be appraised from two points of view. For he is not only an artist. He is also an observer of world affairs with a keen political as well as a prophetic sense. Had some European statesmen paid more attention to his humorous drawings of events in the thirties the cataclysm of the forties might have been averted.

When Japan seized a piece of China, Low sounded a note of warning. He continued to do so when Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, when Franco was murdering Loyalists, and while Hitler was getting ready for Der Tag. His cartoons published then and now contained in the new volume prove conclusively that his foresight was as good as anyone's hindsight. And at the same time that he depicted the impending dangers he drew with trenchant lines Baldwin, Chamberlain, Eden, and the others kowtowing to the aggressors, applauded as they did so by Colonel Blimp, one of the few symbolical characters that he has created.

For unlike many other cartoonists, Low employs reality rather than symbolism to express his ideas. He prefers to portray Russia by a remarkable caricature of Stalin rather than by a bear. John Bull and Uncle Sam rarely appear in his drawings. Instead there are the vacillating Chamberlain, the cigar-smoking Churchill, and the

smiling Roosevelt with a long cigarette holder tilted in his mouth. They are all drawn with masterly reserve, yet they are all startling likenesses, caricatures in the best sense of the word.

Perhaps no cartoon of his shows this discarding of accepted ideas more than the drawing published at the time of President Roosevelt's death. When Lincoln was assassinated Sir John Tenniel's cartoon in *Punch* showed a figure of Britannia laying a wreath on his bier. Low drew a G.I. placing one on a vacant desk on which was lying the late President's cigarette holder. And when the war ended no classical figures appeared in his drawing. Instead an ordinary young man and young woman bared their arms as they looked at the wrecked world and got ready to rebuild it.

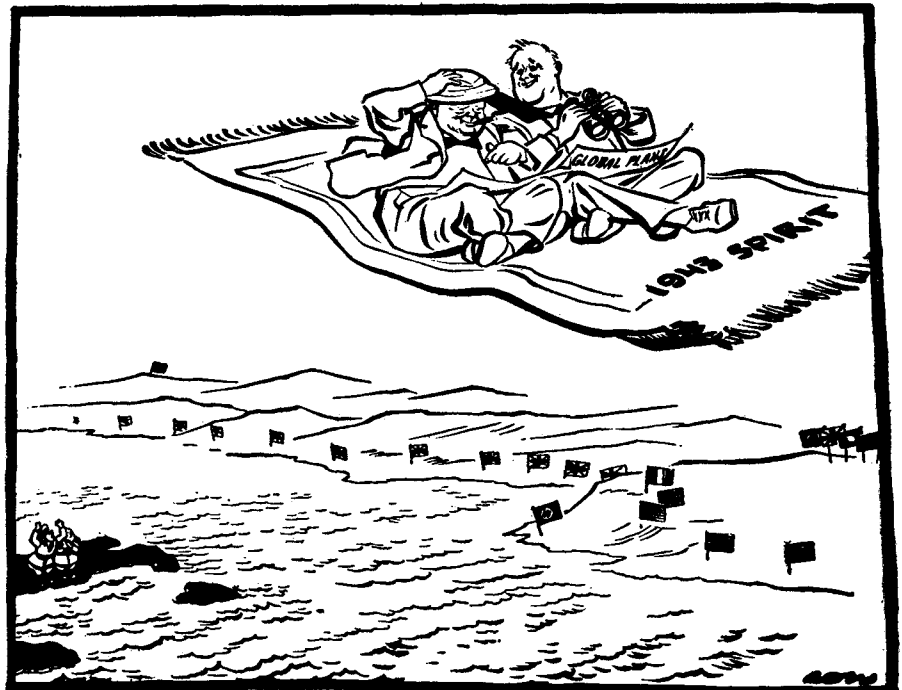
It is this down-to-earth quality which gives Low his peculiar punch. He has an equal appeal for the library worker and for the reader of the comic strip. His drawings are terse, concise, and to the point. They crystallize an important idea into concrete form.

Artistically his drawings are more than competent. Although he is no Daumier or Hogarth, he ranks well compared with Rowlandson, Gilray, Leech, and Tenniel. Moreover, unlike any of these other masters, his cartoons do not smack of any one country.

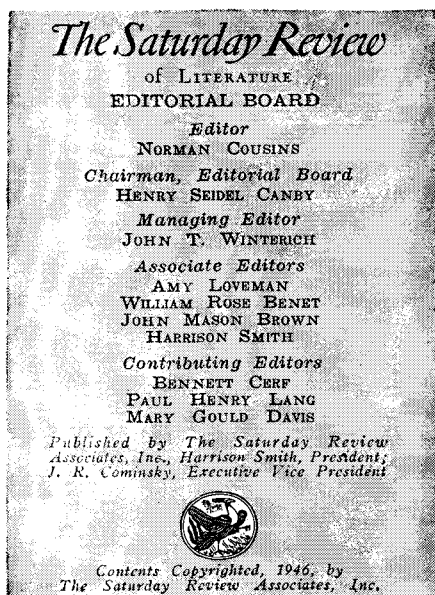
His line is broader and heavier than Phil May's. Yet like that caricaturist whose work in Australia undoubtedly

influenced him, he depends to a large degree on white spaces. He also knows how to compose with splotches of black. In this he is reminiscent of that able, but now almost forgotten Spaniard, Vierge. Seldom is he forced to use any middle tones for his effects. As a result there are a spontaneity and directness in his drawings which are compelling in their appeal. His execution is as forceful as his ideas. And this combination is rare.

The variety of his composition prevents a collection of his work from becoming tiresome or monotonous. Apart from their subjects the drawings are interesting in themselves. It is for this reason that it is to be regretted that the publishers of "The Years of Wrath" saw fit to reproduce them on so small a scale. The book is sub-titled "A Cartoon History of the War," yet although the pages are about eleven by eight inches the drawings are less than half that size. Almost as much space is taken up to remarks by Quincy Howe, which though interesting seem to me almost entirely unnecessary. Most of the drawings are self explanatory. The date of original publication (which is not given) and a line or two of background would have been ample to have made any one of the cartoons clear to those who have already forgotten comparatively recent events. Fifty years hence perhaps an edition of Mr. Low's cartoons will need this amount of text. The publishers themselves say in the blurb on the cover that Low's work "illustrates the truth of the Chinese proverb that a picture tells more than a thousand words." Why drag in the words?



Flying Statesmen—arriving for "unconditional surrender" conference at Casablanca.



## MYRRH vs MURDER

A RECENT correspondent — Ted Gordon of Bell, California, in the August 10 issue—submitted lists of the ten “most beautiful words in English,” as chosen by Wilfred Funk, and the ten “ugliest and most unpleasant words,” as selected by the National Association of Teachers of Speech. (One may wonder, in passing, why each of these agencies left the job half done. Why no list of ugly words from Mr. Funk, and no list of beautiful words from the NATS?)

Mr. Funk's list embraced, apparently with some emotion, *dawn*, *lullaby*, *hush*, *luminous*, *murmuring*, *tranquil*, *mist*, *chimes*, *golden*, *melody*.

The organized nose of the NATS was turned up at *phlegmatic*, *crunch*, *flatulent*, *cacophony*, *treachery*, *sap*, *jazz*, *plutocrat*, *gripe*, *plump*.

Not without significance are Mr. Funk's inclusion of *melody* and the NATS's inclusion of *cacophony*. The particular and highly revealing appositeness of these choices will be indicated presently.

Neither list seems to be in any particular order. Toward the middle, to be sure, Mr. Funk's becomes alphabetical for a moment and then goes haywire again. The NATS list is never alphabetical for more than two words in a row. Does this mean that Mr. Funk regards *dawn* as the most beautiful single word (a sort of Miss English) or the least (of his ten, that is), and does he work up to a climax in *melody*? Do the members of the NATS shudder hardest at *phlegmatic* or *plump*? It is, of course, inconceivable that the association would admit to its higher councils any teacher of speech who was both plump and phlegmatic.

Perhaps it doesn't matter. But what does matter, it seems to us, is that

both Mr. Funk and the NATS have fallen into a trap of whose existence Sir Max Beerbohm (then plain Mr. Beerbohm) gave warning more than thirty-five years ago. In an essay on “The Naming of Streets” he wrote:

There is no word which, by itself, sounds ill or well. In combination, names or words may be made to sound ill or well. A sentence can be musical or unmusical. But in detachment words are no more preferable one to another in their sound than are single notes of music. What you take to be beauty or ugliness of sound is indeed nothing but beauty or ugliness of meaning. You are pleased by the sound of such words as *gondola*, *vestments*, *chan- cel*, *ermine*, *manor-house*. They seem to be fraught with a subtle onomatopoeia, severally suggesting by their sounds the grace or sanctity or solid comfort of the things which they connote. You murmur them luxuriously, dreamily. Prepare for a slight shock. *Scrofula*, *investments*, *cancer*, *vermin*, *ware- house*. Horrible words, are they not? But say *gondola-scrofula*, *vestments-investments*, and so on; and then lay your hand on your heart, and declare that the words in the first list are in mere sound nicer than the words in the second. Of course they are not. If *gondola* were a disease, and if a *scrofula* were a beautiful boat peculiar to a beautiful city, the effect of each word would be exactly the reverse of what it is.

Let us apply this test to the Funk and NATS lists. *Dawn* can be drizzly,

sleety, cold, cheerless, but set by itself, as Mr. Funk does set it, one inevitably envisions the rosy-fingered creature of Homer. *Hush* may be roared at a bawling infant, but here again one thinks rather of stags at eve and birdies tucked in their nests. *Mist* can be the very devil if you have a hundred miles to drive along a coastal highway on a moonless night, but it also suggests dozens of scenes in “*Idylls of the King*.” The seven remaining words connote definitely, if not altogether exclusively, pleasantness.

Why is the NATS queasy about *phlegmatic*? A phlegmatic person should be the least objectionable of men, unless you need his help in a fight. Crunching can be delightful—peanut brittle, for instance. Plumpness is not necessarily a defect. But the other seven “ugly” words (the number must be talismanic) clearly have unpleasant connotations (one assumes that *sap* signifies an individual). A plutocrat is objectionable only to a non-plutocrat, not to himself, but plutocrats, of course, do not call each other plutocrats. Incidentally, our one quarrel with Sir Max's own lists is his citation of *investments* as a word of unpleasant connotation. It is not so regarded in this country. There are probably compatriots of Sir Max who do not so regard it either. J. T. W.

## Men Came Through the Floor

By Robert P. Tristram Coffin

PEOPLE, green earth, the trees were at his door,  
But sea and waves were in under the floor;  
Whatever he thought, whatever the games he played,  
The boy heard sea below and waves it made.

Even in the midst of vast night's gloom  
The floor raised up, a man rose in the room  
With light below him, came up shadow-eyed  
From lanterns, nets, and boat upon the tide.

It was as though his father came from a star  
And brought the light home with him from the far  
Starry places he had sailed that night,  
Came through the floor and filled the house with light.

It was the same even in sunlit day;  
His father and his friends came home that way;  
The boy looked down and past them as they came;  
The sun was there, it licked the waves with flame.

Sometimes the men brought up the silver fish  
Or quahaugs opening like a blue-edge dish,  
But always they had sun or stars somewhere  
Below them as they came up stair by stair.

It was the kind of home a child whose head  
Was full of stars and books would choose. His bed  
Stood over something deep and blue as thunder,  
And men did not come in but came from under.