public health for over 20 years. The son of Scottish immigrants, Robb was born and brought up in Auckland, and successfully campaigned for a medical school to become part of Auckland University College. The economist Brian Easton describes Robb as a “nation builder” and has included this portrait in the current exhibition The Making of Modern New Zealand at the New Zealand Portrait Gallery in Wellington.

Already 62 years old when he sat for this portrait, Robb was friendly with the artist, an Irishman who was just a few years younger, and a senior lecturer in sculpture at the Elam School of Fine Arts. John Kavanagh had emigrated from England in 1951, and immediately came to national attention by winning a competition to design a Seal for the Medical Research Council (MRC) of New Zealand. Robb, who was a member of the MRC from 1950 until 1963, commented that the design was startlingly modern, showing Asclepius struggling with the serpent of disease in angular relief. Kavanagh was one of the most highly qualified sculptors working in New Zealand at that time. A graduate of the Royal College of Art, he had studied sculpture at the Elam School of Fine Arts. John Kavanagh had emigrated from England in 1951, and immediately came to national attention by winning a competition to design a Seal for the Medical Research Council (MRC) of New Zealand.

Painted the year after Douglas Robb was knighted for services to medicine, this work shows the maverick medico at ease in his study, surrounded by his precious book collection. Light falls on his facial features and creates a kind of halo effect behind his head.

If the painter seems to have visualised this medical statesman as the patron saint of the New Zealand health system, it was with good cause – he had been campaigning for better A keen supporter of the visual arts and a close friend of Elam Art History lecturer Rex Fairburn who dedicated his poem “To a friend in the wilderness” to him, Robb was an outstanding surgeon. Fairburn penned a cheeky limerick about him (There once was a surgeon named Robb/ Who would take on the trickiest job/ Put a zip in your foreskin/ Sew on some more skin/ Or screw up your nuts for a bob). Robb operated on Fairburn for the kidney tumour which killed him in 1957. With Fairburn, he had advocated for a professionally run city gallery in Auckland and he endorsed the appointment of Professor Peter Tomory as director in 1956. To coincide with his installation as President at the Annual Conference of the British Medical Association held in Auckland in February of 1961, Robb organised the exhibition Landmarks in the History of Medicine at the Auckland Art Gallery, lending some of his own collection to the display of medical books, atlases, prints and apothecaries’ jars. In September 1967, Robb launched his autobiography at the Auckland Art Gallery, arranging for the Symphonia of Auckland to play at the event.

Appointed Chancellor of The University of Auckland in June of the year in which this portrait was painted, Robb lived to see the first students admitted into the Auckland Medical School in 1968, and the new building open on 24 March 1970. He died in his sleep on the morning of his 74th birthday, leaving his papers to the University Library.

By Linda Tyler
John Francis Kavanagh (1903-1985) Portrait of Sir Douglas Robb, 1961, oil on canvas, 745 x 595mm

2011 has been a year of major achievements at Auckland University Press.

First, the Press topped the list for the number of finalists at the NZ Post Book Awards for the fourth year in a row and, this year, dominated the results with three wins: Poia Rewi’s Whaikorero: The World of Maori Oratory, Lynn Jenner’s Dear Sweet Harry and Chris Bourke’s Blue Smoke: The Lost Dawn of New Zealand Popular Music, which took out the Book of the Year and People’s Choice Awards.

Secondly, the Press committed to leading New Zealand publishing in the ebook revolution. Right now, we are converting 250 of our best titles to ebooks that we will be selling to individuals and libraries both here and around the world. Finally, we never lost our focus on what a university press is here for: discovering the brightest minds and the biggest ideas and taking them to the world.

In 2011, many of those minds and ideas have come from across the disciplines at The University of Auckland: leading art writing in