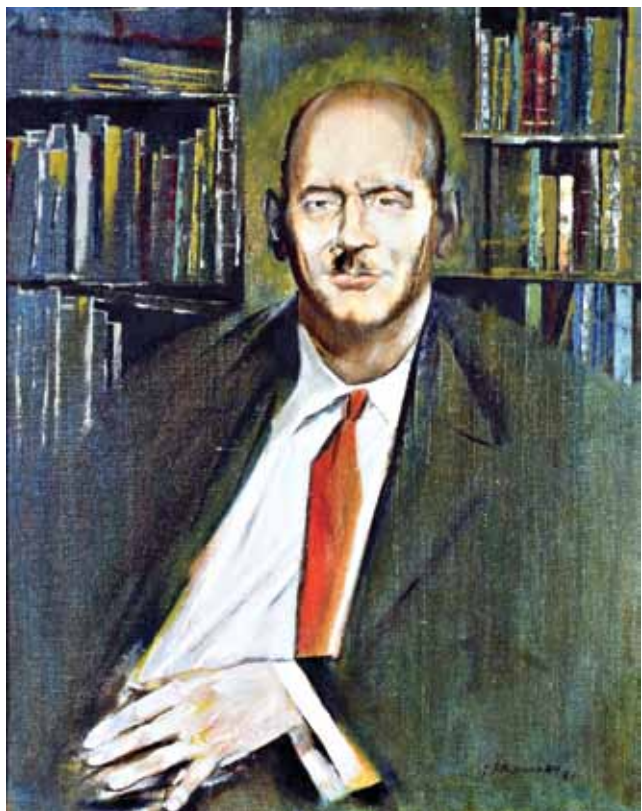


From the collection



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

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 with Henry Moore, worked in Italy and had a work purchased for the collection of the Tate Gallery in London in 1943.

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