No mute inglorious Milton is this bloke,
Nor is he born to blush on desert air
And waste his verse on unreceptive folk.
They’ll listen or he’ll fix them with his stare.

And so the six-fifteen to Remuera,
Applauds our bard at every single stanza.
Accountant Jim moves up to hear it clearer,
And shouts, “Three bucks for fare, and this?
Bonanzal”

Perhaps in this neglected bus there sits,
Some heart that’s pregnant with celestial fire,
And poetry will raise him from the pits,
And lift his mind aesthetically, inspire

A sense that past the game shows and the soaps,
A mystery world of truth and beauty lurks
Which may fulfil his deepest inner hopes,
By leading him to other poets’ works.

As I age I understand more clearly the assertion by classical philosophers and early Christians that vanity is the largest vice or sin. Individual impulses of violence prompted by lust and greed are precise and local, and immediate in their horror. But as vanity expands the ego, it promotes indifference to the rights and fate of others, and paves the way for widespread, careless and sometimes murderous injustice.
Although I was born one week after Pearl Harbor, I was born lucky. I was too young to have to fight and no other war of such scale has occurred. Nor has New Zealand ever again had to conscript young men for military service (my birthday was not even drawn in the ballot that singled out some of my contemporaries for compulsory training). Most of my teachers had fought in either World War I or II, and in one case both, so we assumed that we would also have to fight in a third world war. But it was not to be. By my twenty-first birthday that was a great relief.

By the time I was twenty-five, I knew I'd been lucky for three further reasons.

First, by the age of two, my world was as safe as any child’s world could be, protected by the vast might of the United States and the British Empire, as most people I knew still called it.

Second, antibiotics were now available and were freely given to rout any bacterial infection that put in an appearance. This, and the age-old inoculations for diseases such as smallpox, then later polio, virtually guaranteed that I'd survive infancy, childhood and adolescence.

And third, I was born into one of the world’s most prosperous societies at the start of one of the world’s longest economic booms. I benefited not only from free health services but a free education, opportunities to study abroad without winning a Rhodes, and full and rapidly diversifying
employment. Until university, I confess I enjoyed only sport, plus dancing and wooing (as pashing was then often known); all three have steadily declined in importance across the years.

Much later, I realised that I was even luckier. Being ‘British’ — which was one of our possible identities — also meant that I had inherited immunity to an extraordinary range of diseases, for the seafaring British had helped create the world’s first global disease pools. My ancestors had paid for my immunity. And, as I now realise, I inherited the English language, and so a world in which I could move with great freedom and confidence, familiar with its language, institutions, laws and culture.

Life was also simple and free. When I was six my parents left Auckland and settled in one of the country’s brand new postwar suburbs on the edge of Dunedin. We had no playgrounds as such but dozens of half-completed houses for play equipment, empty paddocks galore, and lagoons and beaches only twenty minutes away by foot. By bike or trolley the distance was much shorter, at least on the outwards journey where the Anderson’s Bay hill lent momentum to anything on wheels. There was also the harbour, but I never much liked the idea of sharing the water with octopuses.

It was a world of huts and gangs, fights and games, more often than not invented or improvised. As long as we were home for dinner at 6 pm nobody much cared what we did, although most fathers walloped and teachers strapped if some rules were broken. Freedom expanded with adolescence. From the age of fourteen I spent my summers working on an orchard in Central Otago, miles away from my parents and every mate I had within twenty minutes’ bike ride. I could just as easily have been in Outer Mongolia! Oh bliss was it . . .

My father was a lecturer in politics and my mother a full-time mother (with a degree in law). I spent most of my adolescence proving that I was no good at study but outstanding at various sports. Being the eldest, however, I was the prisoner of parental hopes and expectations and ended up drifting through school then proceeding to university. Here I not only did better than anyone expected but became a committed socialist and a committed (if troubled) Anglican of the High Church persuasion.

My father was a wonderful tutor, guiding me to an astonishing range of interesting books and essays on politics and religion. Some of the young lecturers who arrived during the late 1950s and early 1960s were also enormously stimulating.

I recall Austin Mitchell not least because he recruited me to help found the Castle Street Branch of the Labour Party. We used to write Fabian-style essays on contemporary issues that concerned us. Like many of my generation I thought the first Labour Government had solved all the problems of our society and that international peace was the last great frontier for humans to conquer — along with the poverty of what we called ‘the third world’. JFK’s dream of putting a man on the moon did not excite me at all. The threat of atomic war outraged me, however, and I joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

I wouldn’t want to pretend that all was high seriousness. Elvis Presley had re-fashioned my cultural universe in 1956, my second year at high school. Dunedin’s endless succession of Saturday night Bible Class dances became the most important part of my weekly ritual and my girlfriend the most important focus for my social life. Later we were regular patrons of Joe Brown’s weekly town hall dance and the concert chamber’s rock ‘n’ roll extravaganzas. I assumed that I would at some point marry and have children. I also assumed that as the male, I would have a job or a career, and that my wife would do as my mum had done and stay home and look after the kids.

I now recall with wry amusement the intensity of sexual desire that arrived with puberty — unrequited and indeed unrequitable. I recall learning from other boys about ‘frenchies’ but have no recollection of hearing of ‘the Pill’. I’m not sure whether it was available to anyone in Dunedin and it was certainly not available to unmarried women.

And then I was sitting my MA examinations and writing a thesis on a socialat who had written novels and been thrown out of the Labour Party, John A. Lee. As I now considered the Labour Party a ‘sell-out’ led by old ‘humbugs’, Lee was just my cup of tea. I spent a summer in Auckland researching Lee and meeting with him regularly. My political education was gathering momentum. Dad got the country’s two radical
papers, Bill Oliver's Comment and Wolf Rosenberg's Monthly Review. Like almost everyone else in New Zealand we got Monte Holcroft's New Zealand Listener. I especially enjoyed Holcroft's editorials. Dad also got Landfall and I began to read it with interest. Part of me wanted to be a poet or even a novelist but I kept those dreams to myself.

To my surprise I got a First and the 'God Professor', William Parker Morrell (known in our household as 'WP'), asked if I'd like to undertake doctoral work at a place called Duke in the United States. Being polite and well brought up I said Yes, I would like to go, although I knew nothing of Duke and little about North Carolina, except that it was in 'the South'. Mum and Dad seemed pleased and as my first serious girlfriend and I had parted company I had no personal reason not to go.

I viewed American foreign policy as reactionary beyond belief, however, and wanted New Zealand to leave ANZUS and adopt a non-aligned stance. Like many on the left I was also suspicious of the world's major capitalist nation. But I had enjoyed Morrell's MA paper on the history of the United States. Lincoln and the Civil War especially fascinated me. Some of the historical sociologists made me dizzy with excitement. As had some of the English Marxists. Why not?

As we sailed across the dazzlingly calm Pacific, a ship's complement of students and nurses on our way to see the world, I had no idea how my own discovery of America would change me. Absolutely and utterly no idea! I was footloose, fancy free, and endowed with an astonishingly generous scholarship, bound for a place I'd scarcely heard of where they liked to have students from the old Empire. Before long I learned the reason. The Empire was dead; the United States had replaced it. They wanted to learn from our experience. I did not feel that I had much to offer but nobody seemed to mind.

Because Duke offered scholarships in the three white Dominions, there was a little community of Kiwis and Aussies. I had long since decided that if I was going to the States I was going to study American history and that is what I began to do. I also took subjects I had not or could not study at home: sociology, Freudian anthropology and a summer school on the relevance of mathematical method to the social sciences.

But so much seemed subtly different. Words had different meanings or nuances; the foods were all different; and so were the sports. Those of us from the real Empire — excluding Canada — regularly camped in the library's air-conditioned newspaper room to read reports about real games in the London Times.

I landed determined to leave before I had been contaminated but slowly found I was enjoying myself. My Kiwi flatmate and I regularly took off for Washington DC and New York. I fell in love with Manhattan from the first moment I set foot there. The energy, dynamism, vitality... after maybe thirty visits I still get the same sense of charged excitement. And the opera, theatre, movies, cheap dives and cheap restaurants, and galleries. Oh those galleries! In my mind's eye I can still see Picasso's Guernica in the Museum of Modern Art on 53rd Street. And the fragile Giacometti statues. Time after time I'd return.

Then I completed my preliminary examination — a gruelling experience — and moved to Washington DC to start doing research for my dissertation. I found the riches of the Renaissance and the Dutch Masters in the National Art Gallery, free chamber music concerts on a Sunday afternoon, and the seemingly endless great monuments.

If New Zealand was the third wealthiest society in the world in the 1950s, then first and third were light years apart. The abundance and wealth of the United States never ceased to astonish me. So did its beauty. I had never imagined anything as lovely as the rolling ranges of Old Smoky in the fall or the Piedmont in the spring. And the size of the galleries, the universities, and their libraries. The rich tradition of scholarly writing about the land and the ways in which it shaped its peoples: Thoreau and his beautiful pond; and the humour. My flatmate had a stock of clever aphorisms culled from authors I had never heard of. But it was the sheer size of the United States that completely astonished me. I came from an island where the sea was never more than 120 miles away, wherever you were, but here four- and even six-lane highways moved endlessly for thousands of miles in almost every direction. I bought an almost-new Ford with automatic gearing for $200.

It was verily a land blessed with abundance.
While the United States was being convulsed with angry arguments about the Vietnam War and Civil Rights Movement, I was one of a small group of New Zealand historians trying to explain why the United States did not have a mass-based Labour or socialist party capable of winning anything. I was convinced that Marxian class analysis must be central to explaining the main changes in the history of the planet's largest capitalist society, although I quickly became aware that over vast stretches of country the industrial revolution was known only by a handful of products shipped in from the Northeast or the Midwest. Regional variations were also fundamental to understanding so much that seemed significant. Over much of the country, and especially in the South, race was vastly more significant than class, both in the past and the present. Outside the South other ethnic or national groupings were so conspicuously visible, as they were in graduate school, that ethnicity itself seemed to have more explanatory power than class.

Other differences emerged more clearly over time. Their radical tradition involved powerful critiques of bureaucratic centralism — New Zealand's dominant tradition — and subtle analyses of the politics of envy as well as the politics of greed. Neither was deemed peculiar to the bourgeoisie. And so my critical engagement with my social democratic heritage began, almost unconsciously. The New Left, the Black Panther Party, the Students for a Democratic Society, all challenged my innocent assumptions. Oddly enough a young economist from Canterbury, Graham Scott, turned up at Duke. We flattered together for a while and argued with passion about the effectiveness of Labour's insulated economy. He thought import controls and exchange controls dysfunctional; at that point I did not.

The various meanings of freedom constituted an even more interesting subversion, not least because so many were exciting. This was the Age of Aquarius, for sure, but it was also the world's most remarkable multicultural society. JFK had been killed before I arrived but one charismatic leader after another articulated heady visions of freedom: Bobby Kennedy, Gene McCarthy and 'the Children's Crusade', and the incomparable Martin Luther King. Not to forget Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and the Black Panthers. And Bob Dylan, Timothy Leary and Herbert Marcuse. I spent fall 1969 doing research in Berkeley as the People's Park riots erupted. The thrill of speaking straight to power, of acting out defiance, was utterly contagious.

As I studied, read contemporary magazines, and talked endlessly, I began to wonder whether a welfare state such as New Zealand's, or Britain's, could ever exist in a society with no fundamental agreement about the values relating to such matters as want, need, education, neighbourliness and even manners.

The ferment of 1967–68 had also seen my life transformed. The political, to invert the great feminist catch-cry of the time, became personal. I fell in love with a divorced French Canadian woman with two small children and we married. My Catholic father was furious but too distant to exert much influence; my Anglican mother talked him round.

I drove back overland with my wife and her two children, leaving Milan, Quebec in December 1969 and embarking from Colombo, Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka) two months later. In short compass I saw more than I had ever imagined. Vast civilisations, indeed, about which I had been taught nothing, unless some European country ruled them for a short while. The enormity of my ignorance, however, paled into insignificance when my first two children were born. I had never anticipated the sheer joy and excitement of parenthood. The rewards of those changing relationships remain one of the great but unexpected blessings of life.

When I came home in 1969, Holyoake still presided over our little country. I recall landing in Auckland to be met by a brother I could scarcely understand and affronted by a city that seemed so small, slow and dirty. The sixties had passed New Zealand by, or so it seemed. Once back in Dunedin I rediscovered that I did like living near the sea and having Central Otago so close. My wife, however, found it terribly Anglo-Saxon, narrow-minded and authoritarian. I had gone away knowing little about the history of New Zealand, and returned with a passion to understand my own country, not only on its own terms but as one
of many New World societies. I was also keen to understand ordinary people and their behaviour and not just the elites, for my six years in the States corresponded to an extraordinary social upheaval now known as ‘the sixties’ and the rise of the ‘new social history’.

The history of New Zealand became my life’s great passion. There was so much unknown, so much to do. I relished this and was lucky to coincide with an awakening interest in our past among New Zealanders more generally. This I shared with a wide range of young men and women of roughly my age who became close friends as well. There was a curious paradox in this. As I immersed myself in our past, the United States put men on the moon and then Britain entered Europe.

I had drifted away from my inherited Anglicanism while in the States, partly because my wife was a lapsed Catholic and a feminist with a fierce desire to find and destroy the patriarchy. It was the age of Kate Millett as well as Germaine Greer. My lapse from Anglicanism did not entail any departure from the ethical traditions of my upbringing. I also retained a strong sense of the numinous and a peculiarly detached view of my own mortality. Lapsing from socialism took much longer and proved vastly more confusing.

I promptly rejoined the Labour Party on my return, this time turning my back on the university branch and joining my local branch (housewives, teachers, small manufacturers and self-employed tradesmen, and even one or two workers). I strongly supported Kirk’s initiatives in foreign policy and began to puzzle about his domestic policies. At both local and national level, Labour seemed unable to comfortably accommodate the aspirations of feminists, Māori radicals, or even radical students. Local social democracy appeared increasingly as insulated as the local economy.

Ironically, in retrospect, Muldoon kept me loyal to Labour and even socialism for the best part of fifteen years. He also confirmed in me my commitment to a mild Kiwi libertarianism although, to be fair, his sure grasp of the national psyche also prompted almost as much self-reflection and analysis as my separation and divorce.

I had spent a long time learning ‘the law of unintended consequences’.

Irony, the stuff of Jewish and (much) English humour, had become more appealing intellectually. These mid-life lessons coincided, because of my age and calling, with the giddy ferment of post-modernism and post-structuralism. Both offered the chance to interrogate my inherited metaphysical assumptions and I now relished learning and teaching a subject other than New Zealand history. This intellectual shift also coincided, roughly, with the election of David Lange’s government.

My generation — one or two of them my friends — had come to power. For me the following five years were marked by great excitement. I was already convinced that the insulated economy and fortress New Zealand had become was dysfunctional; and by and large I and my Caversham Branch were enthusiastic about economic and social reform. The attempt to invent new institutional arrangements that retained a social-democratic vision while escaping the evils of bureaucratic centralism especially excited me.

Of all these heady changes the intellectual ones have proved most fruitful in part for autobiographical reasons. Post-modernism and post-structuralism — untidily overlapping — allowed me to revisit the structuralist assumptions common both to Marxism and historical sociology. Fortuitously I fell in love with another scholar, Annabel Cooper, whose interest in these theoretical issues deeply shaped my own. Thus began the most fruitful intellectual partnership of my life, one that complemented our growing relationship. In 1990 we married.

In 1988 I became Head of History at Otago University and had the fun of redesigning the curriculum and making several new appointments. I introduced a paper on ‘The Welfare State in New Zealand’ which tried to probe the premises underlying our welfare state. David Thomson’s Selfish Generations? and Marilyn Waring’s Counting for Nothing were among the required texts. I also enjoyed teasing the students with Richard Rorty’s irreverent demand that the state compensate him for his bad looks, for that inherited disadvantage had spoiled his life! Most students could not achieve a critical perspective on our welfare state, it must be said, but another new paper, ‘World History (from Olduvai Gorge to the Twentieth Century)’, clearly met a keen and eager market.
Researching and teaching global history served as a nice counterpoint to my major research project, a systematic analysis of the way the citizens of southern Dunedin — the most densely peopled urban area in New Zealand from 1880 until 1940 — dealt with issues of class, religion and ethnicity.

In my sixth decade the university turned me into an administrator and manager. Having been free to do my own teaching and research for almost twenty years, I felt I owed the university a stint. After fifteen years of stints, being unable to complete my more ambitious projects, or even keep them moving forwards, increasingly became a source of frustration.

And then, in the last year of the millennium, we were pregnant and it was twins. A ‘pigeon pair’, as it turned out. Where most of my generation were talking of their grandchildren — which I could soon do too (although my grandchildren live in Quebec and can neither speak nor understand English) — I was once more a dad. This time I was no longer trying to build a career or make my name; this time I was more relaxed and available, which is just as well because twins are full on. Whereas the first time around my first wife and I founded a pre-school and helped run a food co-op, this time I found I had no desire let alone energy to try single-handedly to change much. Six hours’ sleep had become my idea of a major achievement.

It was not quite the law of unintended consequences and I did worry now about what sort of world they would inherit. None of the comfortable certainties of my childhood could be taken for granted any longer. The Internet and globalisation have eroded our ability to use the nation state to redistribute wealth, let alone create it; rising affluence has blurred the difference between rich and poor; education, rather than income or class position, determines life chances. The meaning of left and right, always unstable and prone to shift, has evaporated. All seems uncertain, even menacing. I feel like St Augustine contemplating the Fall of Rome: the tectonic plates are moving, fast; ahead you can see nothing but the void.

Ironic, that, because I also feel the serenity that comes with age, the waning of once-imperious passions and convictions, the sense that the perspective of time inevitably complicates or even calls into question the certainties of youth. And yes, although I have less stamina, I am better at focusing — I’ve always been rather good at that — and get my pleasures from walking the beach and gathering cockles, planting and harvesting my new potatoes, playing Dungeons and Dragons with my nine-year-old son or cheering my daughter as she swoops on the ball. And somewhere, somehow, I enjoy feeling that I have grown in wisdom and serenity, although my children and even my wife might add that I’ve still some way to go . . . Whether I get there doesn’t much worry me. As the song says, ‘I’ve been everywhere’. I’m content.