

Garth George's steely eyes glare out of the page. Set in a face as hard as concrete, the eyes of the *New Zealand Herald's* most controversial columnist dare the reader to challenge the words within.

This poster boy of Christian conservatism has enraged and enlightened his readers for almost 10 years in his weekly column, but in June, aged 65, he retired from the daily newspaper.

His life and career have been a search for relief from an ingrained sense of insecurity. This search has been dominated by two great loves. The first was the seductive influence of alcohol and the second was Jesus Christ.

The rigidity and self-righteousness of his columns give the impression that George is nothing more than a black and white character devoid of subtlety.

The truth is anything but. He has had many personas and owes his life to God, booze and a sexual predator.

At the age of 15 George discovered his first love, alcohol. He was brought up in a loving Christian household but suffered from a significant inferiority complex. Discovering the confidence gained by a few beers changed George's life.

"I never felt part of the group but when I had a few drinks everybody changed and I could chat up the girls and be one of the boys and do things comfortably."

George abandoned his Christian upbringing after his drinking began.

"I discovered that booze could do for me in 20 minutes what the Church hadn't been able to do in 10 years – it made me feel good. When I found booze I wanted nothing to do with God because if I had anything to do with God he would've wanted me to stop drinking."

George's first boss, Malcolm McPhee, the former chief sub-editor at the *Southland Times*, says George's drinking was an attempt to compensate for his imagined failings.

"I sometimes think that had I not discovered alcohol, I might have committed suicide in my early 20s. If I had gone on feeling that discomfort in the world and that inadequacy in the world I might never have survived," George says.

It is an astonishing admission – the very thing that nearly killed him was the only thing that kept him alive.

In his 20s and 30s, George was kept afloat by his journalism talent but drifted from job to job and city to city.

The climax of his drinking came when he found himself at his parents' pensioner flat in Christchurch. He has no memory of getting there. By this stage George was a complete mental and physical wreck and his shattered body could not keep down a glass of boiled water.

It was September 1975 when George rediscovered the God of his childhood.

"When I was a dead man walking and staring into a grave I dug for myself, I cried out in my absolute desperation to the God I learned about in Sunday school.

"He answered my prayer – he must have – because a man who never drew a sober breath for 20 years hasn't tasted alcohol for now 30 years."

His mother called a local doctor who, even though it was late on a Friday night, still decided to make a house call. The minute he laid eyes on George he knew the pathetic sight before him was an alcoholic.

The doctor took George to the hospital and into the hands of the Salvation Army. George believes that doctor is the reason he is alive today.

"By doing what he did he saved my life. I believe he was sent by God to do that."

That doctor was Morgan Fahey, the notorious sexual predator currently in jail for sexually assaulting his female patients. The deity that George cried out to sent a moral degenerate to save the future moral guardian.

Garth George's God certainly works in mysterious ways.

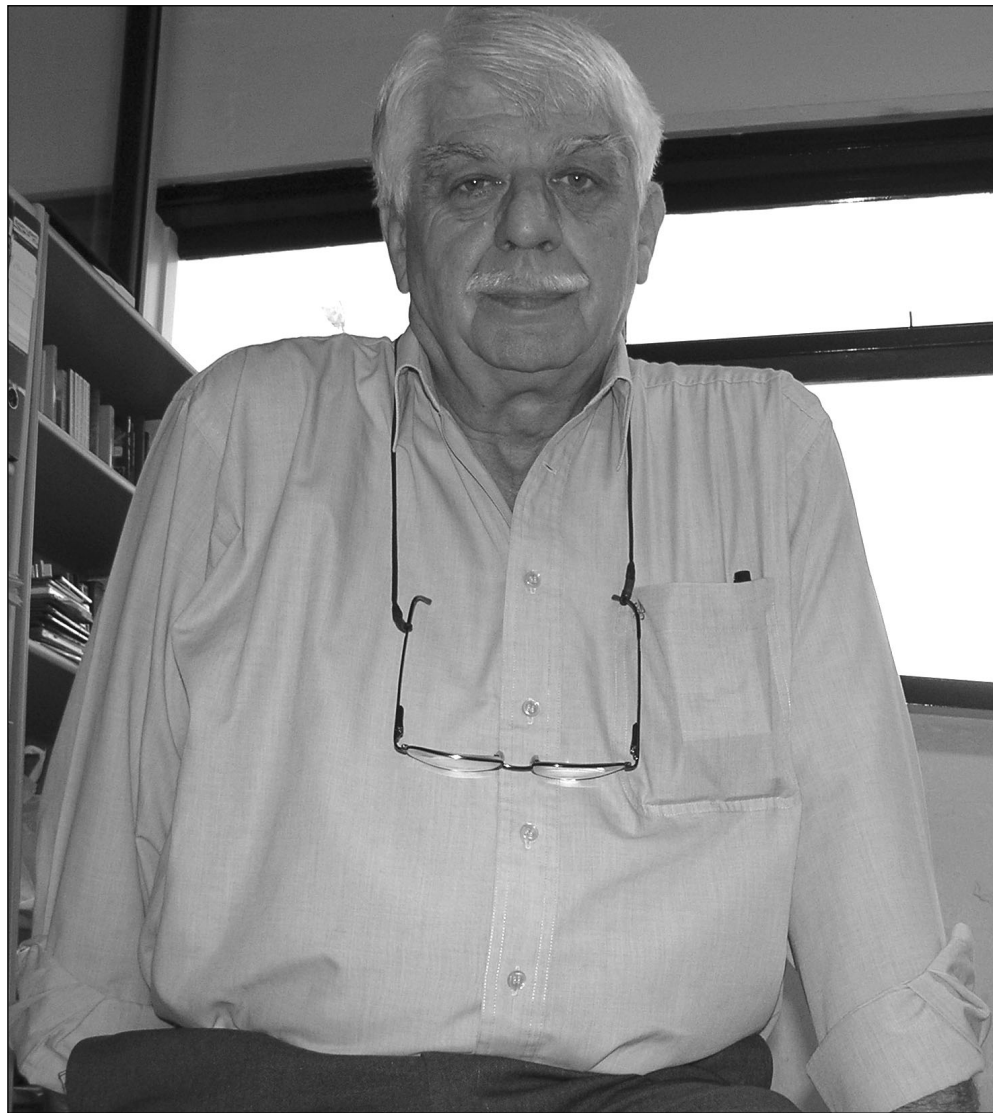


PHOTO: SARAH KACI

From Jim Beam to Jesus

Garth George talks to MILES ERWIN about his life of debauchery, his rebirth through God and his transformation into society's moral guardian.

Chapter two of Garth George's life is dominated by his second great love – Jesus Christ. In a statement typical of a man devoid of irony, George says he isn't religious.

"I haven't got a religious bone in my body but I am a Christian. I have a personal relationship with Christ – that is the defining thing about me."

When he gets going Garth George's voice is immensely powerful and, as he admits, is perfect for his radio work. This strong oratory combined with his talented eloquence makes him tailor-made to be a preacher. With God supposedly intervening to save him, it could be assumed the priesthood was his calling. But he prefers to keep aloof from church matters.

"In matters spiritual never volunteer for anything more than doing the dishes," is his approach to church life.

This personal approach to Christianity leaves George with no time for political churches like Destiny or religious political parties.

"I always keep my Christian views aside. When I'm at work at the *Herald* I'm serving my editor. The editor has been placed above me by God and I serve him – under God of course."

When George speaks of his love of Christ the hard features soften and his eyes lighten. Suddenly the oppressive force that can be George's personality evaporates and he turns into the man his friends describe.

"Garth is like a comfortable old cardigan," says former *Herald* editor and old friend Gavin Ellis. "He comes across as a very gruff and bluff person but in fact he's got a good heart."

Descriptions of George by friends and colleagues all follow a similar pattern. He is called a genuine and caring man who is always forthright with his opinions. But this summary is quickly followed by the disclaimer, "not that I always agree with those opinions".

"He could sometimes be an irascible old bugger but we always got on," says former deputy editor at the *Herald*, Don Milne, before quickly adding the customary Garth George escape clause: "Not that I always agreed with him."

Garth George's opinions stem from an upbringing that encouraged him to think for himself. His father, as secretary of the National Party in Invercargill, introduced him to politics. "I lived in a political environment all

my young life. We had cabinet ministers and members of Parliament in our home frequently and I sat and listened to their discussions."

After finishing Southland Boys High, George was offered a job as a sub-editor at the *Southland Times* by editor Jack Grimaldi, a friend of his father.

"He took a shine to me and he taught me things I'm still doing today. He moulded me as a young journo," says George.

Under the influence of Grimaldi and McPhee, George's talent for journalism was nurtured.

"Certainly he was very skilled with words," says McPhee. "Garth was pretty quick and pretty alert to what made a good news story."

Grimaldi became a seminal influence on George's life. Of the many pieces of advice Grimaldi gave the young journalist, the most important was to become the maxim of his column writing career.

"He always used to say 'whatever I write; love me or hate me but please don't ignore me.'"

From his column it's obvious George took that advice to heart.

The French are "insular and xenophobic"; the Germans are constantly flirting with Nazism; and homosexuals are a steamrolling group of heterophobes occupying positions of power. George's column always expresses a forthright and powerful opinion.

The constant stream of vitriol and criticism that George receives (600 emails last year) does not bother him but does mildly astound him.

"I am completely apolitical and yet I'm accused of bias," he says, genuinely surprised that anyone who reads the line "the fifth Labour Government (four too many eh?)" could get that impression.

However he realises his columns sometimes seriously offend people.

"Mr Grimaldi taught me it's better to attack with a rapier than a broadsword and I'm afraid it's a lesson I've never really learned. I tend to go in with all guns blazing and I sometimes go too far."

But no apology is ever given. If his opinion offends someone then that's just too bad.

"There are a handful of people in this world whose opinion I value highly," says George. "The rest – I don't care what they think about me. Whatever opinion they have of me is as much value as the opinion I express in my column – fuck all."

Despite constantly criticising political institutions and railing against neo-liberalism, George does not view his column as a place to pursue an agenda or push for change. He sees it as a vehicle to entertain and inform and he deliberately spices it up.

"A column's not a place to be objective. It's a place to be subjective and to be controversial. I have to admit it – I deliberately make it controversial. I write it in such a way that people either splutter in their cornflakes or they giggle."

So what does a man who has an opinion on everything actually think about the state of the country?

"I'm not worried about the future of New Zealand. On a perfectly selfish level I'm OK. I've got a lovely home; I've got a couple of cars, a wonderful wife, a cat and a dog. I've got enough money for my own use and a bit to give away – why should I worry?"

It is a surprise that the famously critical reactionary does not actually fear for the future of New Zealand. But then, despite appearances, Garth George is not what he seems. The steely glare and vociferous wit do not represent Garth George the man.

Ellis says he is very different from the person that stares out of the paper.

"He probably was never as bad as his picture made him out to be. But the jury's still out on whether it makes him look better or worse."