

Review: *Years of Rage*

By Hall Greenland

Tom O'Lincoln, *Years of Rage* (Melbourne: Interventions, 2023). pp. 467. \$35 Paper.

This is a comprehensive and action-filled account of the Fraser years, that interregnum between the Whitlam and Hawke-Keating Labor governments. Published in 1993, soon after the events it covers, it deserves to be something of a knockabout left-wing classic and has now been re-issued with an afterword by Rick Kuhn covering the 30 years since publication.

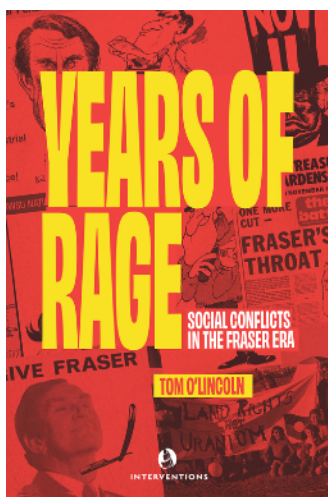
After a cursory pass through the late 1960s and the Whitlam years of the early 1970s, O'Lincoln focuses on the Fraser years, 1975-1983 – these are the years of rage of the title. This is dramatic history, still warm from the heat of battle as the author is a partisan participant in many of the battles covered in this history and this certainly helps convey the sense that these events matter. This is not to say it is not densely and fully documented. The lavish use of photographs is part of this and certainly adds a dimension of *cinema verité* to the text – every picture may not be worth a thousand words but they help capture the stormy events of these years.

In O'Lincoln's narrative of the capital-labour conflicts of the times, the balance of forces is very much determined by the stage of the business cycle. For the first part of the Fraser years, capitalism was in difficulties – spiralling inflation and considerable unemployment, the key elements in what is known as 'stagflation' – and this very much shaped the mood of both workers and employers. With the revival of the economy – the recurrence of yet another resources boom in the late 1970s – workers sensed a tilt in the relationship of forces in their favour and were quick to take advantage of the favourable turn of the economy.

But O'Lincoln is no crude economic determinist. Historical events also shaped the consciousness of the contenders in the class struggle of these years. The Kerr coup, which installed Fraser as PM and the absence of an industrial riposte, the failure of the labour movement to defend Medibank, the lack of support for the Newport power station fight, the defeats in some big strikes such as the Latrobe Valley struggle in 1977 – all boosted the confidence of employers and dampened that of organised workers in the early part of the Fraser period.

As important for O'Lincoln as the underlying state of the economy and the mood of the times, is the question of leadership. Hovering over the multitude of strikes and street clashes of these years – and the

contemporary reader cannot but be amazed at their sheer number – is the person of Bob Hawke. He was, for most of the period, the president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions. The prequel years to the *Days of Rage* period are known as the Whitlam years but even those could just as accurately be dubbed the Hawke years too. His baleful influence of undermining campaigns, cutting short strikes and generally lowering, if not snuffing out, expectations in the 1970s and 1980s is on full view in O'Lincoln's history. Nevertheless, Hawke emerged as some kind of working-class folk hero.



Although O'Lincoln does not directly confront this phenomenon, his narrative suggests that the exhaustion of the contending classes, after a decade or more of intense class struggle, created the conditions for recipes of class peace and cooperation, which Hawke (and even Fraser, if less convincingly) championed. This Bonapartist saviour then steered through the Accord between unions, employers and the government to hold down real wages in return for 'social wage' benefits. These promised boons were largely illusory. This class collaboration approach was accompanied by draconian repression of outliers such as the BLF and the airline pilots.

Of course, Hawke was not alone in dampening down or abandoning strikers and campaigners. O'Lincoln is nothing if not rigorous in his critiques of the lamentable leadership provided to trade unionists in this period, most persuasively in his accounts of the Medibank, Newport and Latrobe Valley conflicts. These years are far from being trade union officialdom's finest hour. O'Lincoln doesn't spare the key Communist union leaders of the period and even extends his critique to well-meaning shop stewards, such as those at Fairfax in Sydney. O'Lincoln's criticisms are based not only on the facts of the events, which he dissects in some detail, but by his own assurance of what 'correct' leadership in strikes consists of.

O'Lincoln makes no secret of his own revolutionary socialist politics and this informs his confident exposition of the prescription for successful strikes – basically, extensive democratic organisation at the workplace, active involvement of as many strikers as possible in pickets and support activity, and extending the strike and solidarity by developing links with similarly organised workers in other workplaces. All this needs to be complemented or underwritten by a frank facing up to the political circumstances of the time. In O'Lincoln's view, the implementation of such a strategy will not happen spontaneously but requires a revolutionary organisation of thousands of activists. As O'Lincoln admits, such an organisation did not exist, and late in the book, he recognises that by the early 1980s, there had been a de-politicisation and de-radicalisation in the working class. But given his view

of crisis-riven capitalism, he expects an upswing from this nadir.

I do not wish to give the impression that O'Lincoln harps on about the 'correct' revolutionary approach, only that the reader is left in no doubt as to what it consists of. In fact, *Years of Rage* oscillates between concluding that objective circumstances, or subjective factors such as the shortcomings in leadership, most undermined chances for victory in the various conflicts of the period. This ambivalence, along with occasional authorial recognitions of success in this or that struggle, even in the absence of revolutionaries, does enrich the text and stimulate the reader to think for him- or herself.

Comprehensive as this history of political and economic conflicts is, O'Lincoln does underplay the emergence of environmental struggles and Green politics in this period. For him, these are middle-class or multi-class phenomena and often represent a resolute attempt to exclude the organised working class from participation. He fails even to detect the emerging Greens party, admittedly then only a speck on the horizon in Australia, let alone foresee its potential as a home not only for radical environmentalists but disappointed Labor militants, a new radical, if reformist, social-democratic formation of some importance.

This failure to foresee the rise of the Greens can easily be forgiven – O'Lincoln's focus is elsewhere. His rather old-fashioned, lefty male dismissal of the women's liberation movement is more difficult to ignore. He finds its insistence on autonomy, for instance, divisive and unnecessary. He fails to see its historically determined necessity as a precondition for breaking free of men's tutelage – including that of 'well-meaning' male comrades. O'Lincoln is on firmer ground when he outlines the loss of radicalism in the women's movement as the 1970s wore on and the 1980s arrived. He skewers the more outrageous statements and positions of some feminists (though, mind you, the contribution of the long history of 'sexism' in the left and the labour movement made to this political waywardness goes unacknowledged). Even here, surely, O'Lincoln goes too far when arguing the impossibility of being a 'socialist-' or 'Marxist-feminist' because 'in reality, socialism and feminism were pointing in different directions' (326).

These blemishes aside, as a compendium of continuous class conflicts – including those of migrant women in particular – *Years of Rage* has few peers in its field. If journalism is the first draft of history, then this almost contemporaneous account of the Fraser 'decade' is its definitive second draft. No account of Australian capitalist society in the short twentieth century will be able to ignore it.

Hall Greenland's The Well-Dressed Revolutionary: the Odyssey of Michel Pablo in the age of uprisings (Resistance Books, London, 2023) was reviewed by John Tully in the previous issue of Recorder.

Death of Kevin Cooper (1 February 1932 - 13 January 2024)

By Brian Smiddy

The recent death of Kevin Cooper, the last of the machine composers, also known as linotype operators, who set the lead type for the printing of the *Melbourne Age*, has died.

Kevin Cooper was a highly respected member of the Printing and Kindred Industries Union (PKIU) all his working life.

In my role as President of the PKIU, I worked alongside Kevin and found him to be an outstanding individual who always stood up to defend the less fortunate members of the Union.

Since his retirement and living in Kilmore, I would see him at meetings and ring him frequently. He enjoyed reading the *Labour History* magazine that I sent to him.

Kevin was born in 1932 in Western Australia, the third oldest of a family of ten children. He served his apprenticeship in his home state transferring his employment to *The Age* newspaper in 1969. His employment with *The Age* finished in 1994 at the time of the introduction of the electronic means of typesetting.

Kevin chose to work as a time operator at *The Age*, which meant he received a standard weekly income. Subsequently, he moved to South Australia and returned to Victoria about twenty years ago and settled in Kilmore

He represented *The Age* employees at the monthly union meeting on the Board of Management of the PKIU. He was always prepared to speak his mind on any subject.

Val Noone, another *Age* employee and active unionist, remarked that Kevin was kind hearted, friendly and a capable person. Kevin Davis, the Father of *The Age* Chapel at the time of Kevin's employment, also has fond memories of his friendship. This was evident in his unflinching support during the tumultuous disputes over the introduction of computerised typesetting to the newspaper industry.

Kevin Cooper was also an active member of the ALP and joined the Box Hill branch in 1983.

To Kevin's family, we extend our deep sympathies at his passing.

Brian Smiddy was a former president of the PKIU and a long-time secretary of the Melbourne Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. His memoir, written with Jean Ker Walsh will be reviewed in the next edition of Recorder.