Most people in South Australia with an historical bent are aware of 'the Playford legend'. This holds that, during his record 27 years as premier of South Australia between 1938 and 1965, the leader of the Liberal and Country League (LCL), Sir Thomas Playford, transformed the state's economy from one more or less dependent upon primary industries to one more reliant on secondary industries. There is no doubt that, due to its dependence upon the products of agriculture, sheep-farming, and horticulture, South Australia suffered greatly – probably more than any other state – during the Great Depression of the early 1930s. Its prosperity plummeted and its unemployment rate spiralled. To ensure that such a catastrophe never occurred again – or at least in such proportions – Playford set about attracting secondary industry to South Australia, a programme which, according to the legend, achieved spectacular and unparalleled success as early as the 1940s. True, some scholars have argued that, during the post Second World War era, the growth of secondary industry in South Australia was not significantly greater than that in most other states and, indeed, not as great as that in others. They have argued, too, that Playford was neither the initiator nor the prime mover of the policy; it had been begun by his predecessor, Sir Richard Butler, and carried through by the dedicated public servant J.W. Wainwright and others. Nevertheless, no one has denied that the growth of secondary industry in South Australia during the Playford era was impressive or that Playford himself wholeheartedly promoted it.
How Playford pursued the policy is important here. Basically, he provided a wide range of incentives to companies to set up their headquarters, or at least branches, in South Australia. Central to the policy was making it cheaper for companies to establish themselves and continue to do business in South Australia vis-a-vis other states, especially New South Wales and Victoria. In the driest state in the driest continent it was imperative that water be sold to them at cheaper rates. In a state where, during the Depression, building had almost come to a standstill, it was important that a company’s workers could find low-cost accommodation. For this reason the South Australian Housing Trust — proudly touted in 1936 as the first public housing authority in Australia — was vigorously supported. During the Playford era the Trust built nearly 56,000 houses and flats. As late as the early 1990s more than a fifth of the state’s population was still living in Housing Trust homes. Not least, Playford insisted that the state would prosper and employment would be maximised if both prices and wages were kept lower in South Australia than in the eastern states. He reasoned that if workers had jobs, were well-housed, and had to pay less for goods and services than did their counterparts elsewhere in Australia, they would be content to receive smaller paypackets. To top it all, Playford was exceptionally frugal with the public purse, spending as little as he could on the arts, health, education, and social services.

Cynics would claim that Playford could achieve so much only because of the almost unassailable hold that he and the LCL enjoyed over the government of South Australia. The electoral system — the infamous ‘Playmander’ — provided for a two-to-one ratio of country over metropolitan seats and ensured that the party won every state election between 1938 and 1962. ‘The Playmander’ guaranteed the LCL’s control over the state’s Treasury benches until such time as the drift of population away from formerly rural areas eroded it. In the meantime the party enjoyed an almost unprecedented security. As Blewett and Jaensch wrote, ‘the practice of rural overweighting, both as regards the extent of the imbalance and the degree of party advantage accruing, reached its zenith in Australia in Playford’s South Australia’.

But the malapportionment of the electoral system was not the only factor helping Playford stay in power. The Labor opposition was extremely weak at both the organisational and parliamentary levels. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) suffered a debilitating split over the Premiers’ Plan during the Great Depression of the early 1930s, recovering slowly only after Clyde Cameron’s reforms of the party in the late 1940s; moreover, throughout the 1950s it was led by ‘Mick’ O’Halloran, who not only agreed with most of Playford’s policies but also enjoyed close personal relations with him. Indeed, O’Halloran was often referred to as Playford’s ‘junior partner’. In the post-war period challenges to Playford were weak and criticism of him was muted.

All this, while it bears repeating, is common knowledge among students of South Australian history. Hardly known, however, is the role played in the state during these years by one of Playford’s most vociferous critics — the Plasterers’ Society of South Australia and especially its dedicated secretary, James Luke Cavanagh. This is hardly surprising given that the history of trade unionism in South Australia, in contrast to the history of the state branch of the Labor party, has not been extensively explored. Moreover, the Plasterers’ Society was always one of the smaller unions in the state. While it possessed a power out of all proportion to its size, it could never seriously threaten Playford’s hold on power and the continuance of his governments. And Cavanagh, if he is remembered at all, is remembered as a Labor senator for South Australia in the 1960s and 1970s and an embattled minister for aboriginal affairs in the Whitlam governments. Historians interested in individuals and organisations who challenged Playford have preferred to focus on charismatic figures in state parliament, especially Don Dunstan. Yet, as this paper attempts to show, Cavanagh and the Plasterers’ represented both a source of vociferous criticism of Playford and his policies and also something of a threat to the premier’s vision for the state. As a contemporary and fellow unionist put it, Cavanagh was ‘Tom Playford’s... nightmare’.

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James Luke Cavanagh

The life-histories of Cavanagh and the Plasterers' are connected from the late 1930s and inseparable from the mid 1940s. About the union very little is known. Formed during the First World War, it remained a tiny organisation until the late 1940s. When Cavanagh was elected its secretary in October 1945 it had fewer than 250 members. Its ideological outlook was radical, but it was not especially militant and its public visibility was low. It was one of the less influential unions in South Australia. Under Cavanagh it was transformed. Within a few years its membership grew significantly, its militancy intensified, its prominence mushroomed and, most importantly, it greatly enhanced its influence within Trades Hall, the ALP and the labour movement generally.

In many ways the young Cavanagh was 'a chip off the old block'. Not especially interested in sport, he became like his father an atheist, a working-class militant, a lifelong 'pacific-ist', and an avid reader of books, including fiction, which dealt with working people and radical ideas. In later life he boasted that he had 'one of the best working-class libraries in South Australia!' He joined the Labor party at only 16, and the following year became secretary of the Bowden-Brompton branch and its delegate to the party's state council.

Like many of his generation, Cavanagh was scarred by the Great Depression of 1929-33. A casual laborer from time to time, he endured three years of unemployment. Brompton depended upon its brickworks, and when they closed down unemployment in the district rose to a level much higher than the national average. The sight of men desperate for work, women struggling to make ends meet, and children whose clothes were so ragged that their parents were ashamed to send them to school, heightened his sympathy for working people and his hostility toward capitalism and capitalists. It also made him bitter and dogmatic. 'Those conditions', he mused, 'you never forget them ... The poverty was tremendous'. But he was also impressed by how local people would rally round someone in particularly straitened circumstances. These experiences reinforced not only his working-class consciousness but also his belief in the need for working-class solidarity.

But it was his father, more than anyone else, who had an indelible influence on him and undoubtedly aroused his interest in the labour movement. James Cavanagh senior was always active in working-class politics, referring proudly to his participation in the famous lockout at Broken Hill in 1909 and the anti-conscription campaigns of 1916-17, and claiming to have learned about socialism alongside such future Labor 'greats' as John Curtin and Norman Makin. A boilermaker by trade and later a land salesman by choice, he suffered periodic bouts of alcoholism and was often unemployed. For some years he represented the ward in which they lived on the Port Adelaide City Council.

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In the 1930s he joined the Homeless Unemployed Association, which constantly pressured the state government to alleviate the privations endured by people in the Bowden-Brompton district. As well, he became secretary of the South Australian branch of the Movement Against War and Fascism, took an active role in the Spanish Relief Committee, and served on a committee to protest against Japanese aggression in China, all of which allowed him to express his crystallising anti-war beliefs. When the Second World War broke out Cavanagh, unlike his older brother and many of his peers, did not enlist. To him the conflict was much closer to home. He saw the class struggle as much more important than the war between the western democracies and the fascist powers.

During the early years of the war he acquired a deserved reputation as a young and very militant trade unionist. In 1941, while working on the site of a bombing and air gunnery school in the small industrial city of Port Pirie, he took a leading part in a strike against conditions on the site. Probably the first of countless occasions on which his union activities were unfavourably reported in the press, it allowed his critics in later life to claim that he was effectively a communist and had hindered the war effort. At about this time he married Elfreda Lamm, a waitress in a hotel he frequented while working on the building of the hospital in Port Pirie. Married life — and three children — did little to mellow Cavanagh, whose willingness to confront 'the bosses' seemed to grow with each passing year. His opportunity to do more in and with the union came in October 1945 when the secretary of the Plasterers' Society retired after nineteen years in the job. Cavanagh stood for the position and, to his surprise, won. The opposition was divided, and at the eleventh hour the communists threw their support behind him. A laconic and virtually unflappable man, Cavanagh often reflected on the role of luck at crucial points in his career.

The Plasterers' Society

The union Cavanagh inherited was effectively in its infancy, small, and poor. In 1945 it could not afford a full-time secretary, let alone a car for him to get around in. For some years he used to visit building sites by taking the train and cycling the rest of the way. Yet, during the decade and a half after the war (1946-61) Cavanagh was able to transform the fortunes of the union. Under his secretaryship — and against the background of a housing shortage, a building boom, and an almost constant demand for labour — the union grew steadily. Although it remained one of the smaller unions in South Australia, under 1500 members, its influence grew disproportionately because its role in the building industry was crucial. If the plasterers were pulled off a job — on a residential, commercial, or public building — then all work on the site normally stopped and did not resume until the plasterers returned. The union had power and used it.

By the early 1950s the Plasterers' Society was possibly the most militant trade union in the state, and Cavanagh was one of the most publicly visible union leaders. Feared and even hated by many builders, he was greatly respected in his union and in the wider labour movement. Under Cavanagh the Plasterers' Society became the acknowledged leader of the building trades unions. Frequently attacked by employers and occasionally condemned by Adelaide's morning broadsheet, the Advertiser, between the mid-1940s and the early 1960s, they became household names in South Australia.
Plaster Factories
Close Down

Nearly every fibrous plaster manufacturer
in the metropolitan area closed down
yesterday when members of the Plasterers' Society refused to work on a weekly hiring
basis.

A secret ballot held by the union showed that they would not accept a wage increase
and to an hourly rate of £1 per hour. The town council of fibrous
makers agreed to work a 44-hour week but the local authority refused to
accept this wage increase.

The scene of three fibrous
makers during the strike between the employers and the society
was still apparent yesterday. The tension between employer and employee was
high, and it seems that fibrous
makers will continue to work under the same conditions.

Plasterers To Confer

Yesterday representatives of both parties in the dispute
met at a wages board meeting. The talks were
smoothly arranged at a wages board meeting.

The talks proceeded at the
Plasterers' Society and Cavanagh said later that the
union and employers had agreed to work a 44-hour week but the local authority refused to
accept this wage increase.

The tension between employer and employee was
high, and it seems that fibrous
makers will continue to work under the same conditions.

UNION CHARGED BY SUMMONS

The Plasterers' Society was served with a summons
yesterday afternoon at the Supreme Court of South
Australia.

The summons was
issued on the complaint of the Secretary of the Plasterers' Society, Mr. J. L. Cavanagh, who
appeared for the Society in the
Supreme Court of South Australia.

The further evidence which was tendered was that the
union had been charged with
the violation of the provisions of the Industrial Code.

The normally packed plasterers
of the union had turned out in large numbers to
support their secretaries.

The plasterers were
charged with the violation of the provisions of the Industrial Code.

The case was
heard by the Hon. Justice Throssell, and the court was adjourned until
February 2, 1953.

The plasterers were
charged with the violation of the provisions of the Industrial Code.

Advisers press clippings, from left, 2 September 1949, 12 February 1958 and 4 November 1952 (Courtesy Advertiser)

The Plasterers' Society was seldom out of the news. Hundreds of clippings from Adelaide's daily newspapers, the "Adviser" and the evening tabloid the "News". If it was not a strike it was the threat of one; if the union's members were not pulled off a job they were at least told to 'go slow'; if a black ban was not placed on all plaster manufacturers and builders, it was imposed on some; if Cavanagh wasn't pursuing the union's demands through a wages board, he was spending
an enormous amount of time in the State Industrial Court; if he was not trying to drum up support in the United Trades and Labour Council (UTLC) in which he was very active, he was certainly doing so in the Building Trades Federation - of which, for a
while, he was secretary; if he wasn't criticising the UTLC or the ALP for not totally supporting the Plasterers' in a dispute, he was criticising the Playford government for not intervening and settling it.

Naturally, much time and energy was spent trying to obtain higher wages for his members, most of whom were solid plasterers, fibrous plasterers, and terrazzo workers. The union's wage demands escalated in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1946 the campaign was for a 14s increase in weekly wages for all plasterers; in 1950 it was for a minimum wage of £12 for solid plasterers; and by 1955, after the huge inflation which had accompanied the Korean War, it was for a minimum weekly wage for all plasterers of £22.

In 1950 it also wanted time-and-a-half for overtime, and double-time on Sundays. At the same time the union pursued special allowances for sections of the membership, such as a 25s bonus for fibrous plasterers working in country areas. Such demands, and especially their 'flow on' effects, ran counter to Playford's policy of keeping wages and the cost of housing in South Australia lower than those in the eastern states.
However, perusal of the many reports in the daily newspapers about the union’s activities suggests that it placed a higher priority on conditions than on wages and allowances. In 1946 it wanted fourteen-days annual leave for all plasterers, and by 1950 was demanding a five-day working week of forty hours. Health and safety were always major considerations. In 1951 it wanted employers obliged to provide not only lockups for plasterers’ tools but also first-aid kits and ‘mess-dressing’. At the same time it wanted ‘suitable sanitary accommodation’. Before this time a toilet on a housing site was usually no more than a hole in the ground surrounded by a makeshift structure of hessian bags. Eventually, employers had to provide permanent but portable toilets. Cavanagh was so concerned with toilets that plasterers, jokingly but appreciatively, dubbed him ‘the shit-house secretary’ - a label that Clyde Cameron later also claimed.

The Plasterers’ Society always opposed ‘piece-work’ - and for many years it opposed work on weekends, indeed any overtime at all. Making the case that annual leave should be for rest and recreation only, it did not want its members to do any work during their annual fortnight off. On at least one occasion it prosecuted a union member who did. Neither the demands for better conditions (with their associated higher costs) nor the brake on extra work was welcomed by a state government determined to house as quickly as possible South Australia’s steadily growing industrial and largely migration-driven workforce.

Many of the Plasterers’ Society’s demands were less obviously those of a trade union pursuing the interests of its members than those of a pressure group actuated by what would today be called ‘a social conscience’. Some of its concerns were do with the Housing Trust and its policies. While aware of and approving the Trust’s success in providing basic, rentable houses and flats for poorer sections of the community, the union had serious concerns about the quality of this accommodation. It kept up a campaign against ‘prefabricated inferior houses’ and timber-frame dwellings, both of which it considered fire hazards. The union also resented the fact that plasterers did a lot of work on homes which they believed were more often allocated to the British and other migrants - who were then pouring into South Australia faster than they were into other states - than to Australian workers. As a result it pressured the state government to reserve a proportion of houses for trade unionists and to have trade union representation on the Trust’s council. The Plasterers’ were not, of course, the only voices raised against the speed and expediency with which the Trust was then erecting dwellings, but their was no less unwelcome to a state government trying to house workers as cheaply and quickly as it could.

From time to time the Plasterers’ Society provided free labour, for instance during the building of a poliomyelitis clinic in Adelaide in 1949. Once a year it took children from the orphanage in Goodwood on a picnic. Cynics might say that the union was merely trying to offset the poor image it had in the public’s mind as a militant, obstructive, and strike-prone body, but it undoubtedly took a wider view of its role in society. And in doing voluntarily what it believed the state government itself should be doing, it inevitably highlighted Playford’s refusal to expand the limited social services the state government provided South Australians.

Like many a self-declared left-wing union, the Plasterers’ believed it should adopt stances and perhaps even take industrial action over political as well as industrial issues. Within the union this was a tradition that Cavanagh inherited rather than initiated. In 1945, even before he had become secretary – although he had for a few years been on its management committee – the union had argued that the federal government should give men who had served in combat zones a ‘battle bonus’, and it wholeheartedly supported the nationalisation of banks. Under Cavanagh this role intensified, the union becoming almost as ready to criticise the Labor Party as it was the Menzies government in Canberra and the Playford government in South Australia. In 1949, for
instance, while it threatened to place a ban on doctors who would not cooperate with the Chifley Labor government’s free medicine scheme, during the coalminers’ winter strike in New South Wales it supported the miners and condemned the federal government’s use of troops to break the stoppage. Cavanagh took an active part in the local Miners’ Defence Committee, threatened a stop-work meeting of plasterers, and was nearly expelled from the Labor Party over the issue.

Much more opposed to the Menzies government’s Communist Party Dissolution Bill of 1950–51 than was the Labor Party itself, Cavanagh, like his father, was conspicuous in Adelaide in the campaign to stop it being passed by parliament. Led by Cavanagh, the union declared itself for the United Nations and disarmament, endorsed a ban on the building of the rocket range at Woomera in the remote north-east of South Australia, and opposed the establishment of foreign bases and the mining of uranium in the state. None of this would have pleased a premier uneasy about trade unions’ involvement in political affairs and primarily concerned that they play their part in developing the state’s new secondary industries.

Legal and direct action

Yet, however interested Cavanagh and the union’s management committee might have been in such matters, they were compelled to concentrate on industrial issues. Between 1945 and 1962 Cavanagh spent an extraordinary amount of time arguing the union’s positions in the State Industrial Court. If employers proved particularly recalcitrant, the Plasterers’ occasionally took them to the police court. Over time, Cavanagh, a man of very little formal education, became an accomplished ‘bush lawyer’. He was remarkably unafraid of real lawyers. In spite of the fact that many of the issues he argued in court were so complex that they defied exposition, he much more often than not bested employers’ representatives in the courts. His voice was gravelly, his delivery slow, but he chose his words carefully and was a very effective speaker. A former president of the UTLC was exaggerating only a little when in 1961 he reflected that Cavanagh ‘takes more employers to court for breaches of awards than does any other union secretary in Adelaide ... Almost invariably, when he goes to court he is successful’. The fact that Cavanagh was eventually appointed to the South Australian Board of Industry testifies to his skill and experience.

The Plasterers’ Society saw itself more as an old-style craft guild than a modern mass trade union. Maintaining and improving the standards of the plaster trade was always important to it. Post-war reconstruction and the Chifley government’s plans to retrain Second World War veterans presented Cavanagh and the union with a challenge. In early 1947 the union withdrew about sixty trainee plasterers from a school run by the Department of Post-War Reconstruction on the grounds that too few instructors and too many trainees threatened its standards. ‘We withdrew our support from the scheme’, wrote Cavanagh (in one of his many letters to the Advertiser) ’until such time as we are assured that the future entries to our craft will be taught the trade of plastering, and not become second-grade wall-coverers’. In later years it insisted that it had the right to the final say as to how many men were recruited into and trained for the trade. Unlike many unions, the Plasterers’ Society did not seem to be interested in signing up as many members as it could. Increasingly, frustrated employers and disgruntled unionists claimed that the union was difficult to join and that its management committee was trying to restrict the number who entered the trade, keep the membership of the union low, and the employment prospects of plasterers high. The union’s concern to maintain control over the plaster trade was another reason why it came into conflict with employers and Playford’s vision for South Australia.
Underlying the Plasterers' approach to the workplace was a range of beliefs that ran entirely counter to those espoused by the state government. Cavanagh's typically uncompromising stances and the union's almost-always militant actions were based on much more than a belief that a trade union existed to do what it could to bring about increased wages and improved conditions for its members. A fundamental belief was that, under capitalism, constant conflict between 'the bosses' and the workers was inevitable and that sustained cooperation was neither possible nor even undesirable. Unlike most other trade union leaders in the state, Cavanagh was unwilling to make any gestures of friendship toward employers. This was shown symbolically in late 1948 when, after the president of the UTLC had attended the Chamber of Manufactures' annual dinner, Cavanagh attempted to have the council dissociate itself from its president's action on the grounds that members of the UTLC should not be dining with 'enemies of our class'. For the same reason it was as critical of moderate or right-of-centre leaders within the Labor party. When 'Joe' Sexton was appointed organiser of the state branch in 1953, the Plasterers' stridently criticised the decision in a letter to the state secretary (Jim Toohey), subsequently refused to withdraw the letter, and were eventually expelled. (It did not reaffiliate until 1957.) At about the same time, after the UTLC had seemed to procrastinate over several issues, the Plasterers' withdrew its delegates from the body until that president had retired.

Another closely-associated belief was that, since employers and employees were engaged in a never-ending war, the union had no choice but to pursue its goals with all the resources at its disposal. In 1955, when the UTLC was discussing the 'continuous attacks on the trade unions by employers', Cavanagh told delegates that it was the trade union movement rather than the employers who should be launching the attacks. 'The only language the employer knew', he was reported to have declared bluntly, 'was to stop his profits'. A third belief was that direct action was more effective than arbitration. Of course, while Cavanagh sometimes scorned the arbitration and conciliation system, he seldom spurned it. He learned its ways and exploited them to the full. Workers, through their trade unions, could never achieve all they wanted and deserved through the courts. He believed that arbitration was effective only if used in conjunction with a strike or at least the threat of one. While he may have conceded his peers' claims that, since the arbitration system had been introduced, 'Australian trade unions did not have a legal right to strike', he would have been the first to insist that workers retained not only a moral but also an inalienable right to withhold their labour.

Consistent with these beliefs was the conviction that worker-solidarity was sacrosanct and that unionism, its organised expression, must be protected whatever the cost. Anyone - employer or employee - who threatened to divide the workers or weaken the union was regarded as an enemy. That all workers should belong to a union, that employers should not employ non-unionists, and that unionists should not be required to work alongside non-unionists were articles of faith in the Plasterers' Society. The union never hesitated to pull its members off a site if the company employed non-union labour. Any threat to the union's right to protect its craft met no less resistance. If a company did not pay members the rates to which they were entitled, employed plasterers as labourers, or took on carpenters when plasterers might reasonably be expected to do the job, it risked the loss of at least part of its labour force.

The union's access to its members was also vigorously defended. If a company refused a union official entry to a site at any time, insisted that such an official obtain permission from the firm to see members of the union, took such an official to court for being unlawfully on the premises, or if the union even suspected that a union official was being victimised, the Plasterers' would swiftly take industrial action. Access to employers was also important. If a company refused to negotiate with the union - and on the union's terms
- it would suffer. In responding to these issues it is impossible to distinguish between instances when the union was acting in accordance with long-held beliefs of the trade union movement and when it was primarily acting in its own interests. But there can be no doubt that whenever Cavanagh proposed a course of action, he discerned and appreciated its underlying principle.

Enemies from within and without
As the foregoing suggests, the union in general, and Cavanagh in particular, upset a lot of people and made many enemies. To many employers involved in the building industry the Plasterers' Society was the union with which they most hated to deal and Cavanagh the official with whom they least wanted to argue. When the demand for houses and other buildings was high (as was the case throughout this period) and the supply of workers - particularly skilled workers such as plasterers - was low (and this was most of the time), the union's demands were at best frustrating and at worst intolerable. This was not just because of the time and money spent resisting, and more often than not acceding to, the union's demands on the job sites and in the courts. Individual firms (such as Ingham's) and employer organisations (such as the Fibrous Plaster Association) increasingly retaliated by suing the Plasterers' Society. Managers were not just protecting the interests of their companies, nor employer organisations just looking after those of the building industry. Nor was it the realisation that whatever victories the Plasterers' Society had in the State Industrial Court meant 'flow on' effects into other industries. It was also that they were almost always on the defensive. In 1959 the exasperated secretary of the South Australian Employers' Federation (G.E. Pryke) wrote to the Advertiser claiming that employers had 'become confounded by the incessant accusations and threats made by the Plasterers' Society'. There must have been times when spokesmen for employers and employer organisations complained to Playford about the Plasterers'. Moreover, the union frequently alienated other trade unions. As was common in the post-war years, a high proportion of the industrial strikes the Plasterers' Society initiated or threatened were the product of demarcation or other disputes with other unions. For instance, in 1946, after one of the biggest unions in the state, the Australian Railways Union (ARU), had been granted an award that covered plasterers working in the railways, the Plasterers' Society withdrew all labour from the South Australian Railways and criticised the ARU for its 'unwarranted intrusion into their craft'. In February 1948 the plasterers refused to work on the new powerhouse the Electricity Trust of South Australia (ETSA) was building at Osborne because some builders' labourers had defied their own union's directive to temporarily withdraw from the job. And when, in 1950, the Plasterers' Society banned work on Housing Trust homes, the other building trade unions refused to support the ban and the Builders' Labourers' Union (BLU) actually disaffiliated itself from the Building Trades Federation (BTF). One of the Plasterers' Society's longest strikes occurred in 1959 in protest against other tradesmen being allowed to do work - the erection of tiles on suspended ceilings - which was properly that of plasterers. Whether Playford took any interest in these internal disputes within the trade union movement is not known, but he was undoubtedly frustrated by the frequent disruption of work on what were often state-owned utilities and services.

These were by no means minor events. The ETSA powerhouse dispute nearly ruined the union. When a number of builders' labourers defied the BTF and continued to work on the powerhouse, Cavanagh, as BTF secretary, issued a vehemently worded leaflet entitled 'Osborne scabs must go'. Twelve of the builders' labourers, led by a man called Murphy, alleged they had been libelled, and sued for damages. The case ended up in the Supreme Court where Cavanagh, the Plasterers', the BLU, and the publisher were ably defended by Elliott Johnston, a communist and the head of one of the best-
known legal firms in Adelaide. Justice Abbott, for several years previously Playford's attorney-general, found for the prosecution and ordered the defendants to pay each of the plaintiffs £400. Admittedly, an appeal to the full Supreme Court lessened the amount the Plasterers' had to pay, and the financial burden was eased by an appeal to the trade union movement in South Australia and building trades unions throughout the nation. But it was a salutary lesson. While it did not force the Plasterers' out of existence or cripple it for years to come, Murphy v. Plasterers illustrated the vulnerability of the union to both industrial and judicial defeat.

During the late 1950s the Plasterers' were engaged in a series of major and long-lasting disputes that took on some of the characteristics of a war. Their targets were the three leading fibrous plaster manufacturers in South Australia – F. Ingham, H.E. Sugars, and Ceilings Limited. Ostensibly the issues included such matters as the absorption of basic-wage increases in over-award payments and the re-engagement of over-award plasterers at award-only rates of pay. Ultimately, however, the issues became broader and concerned whether employers could hire whomever they wanted, whether union members could defy their union, and even something as fundamental as whether the union had the right to call a strike. The Fibrous Plaster Association took the Plasterers' to the State Industrial Court (SIC) alleging that on two occasions the union had 'committed an act in the nature of a strike'. One of the companies took Cavanagh to the police court for being illegally on its premises. Both actions failed. The Plasterers', as was almost always the case, got much if not most of what they wanted. However, these were not only near-Pyrrhic victories but also harbingers of worse to come.

Indeed, for the Plasterers' the most serious outcome of these drawn-out and overlapping disputes was a move from within their ranks to destroy it as a trade union. H. Dalton, a foreman working for Ingham's on the construction of the new Queen Elizabeth Hospital at Woodville and a member of not only the union but also its management committee, was particularly hostile to Cavanagh. During the dispute with Ingham's, Dalton defied a union directive by asking fibrous plasterers on the site to work on a Saturday. He was suspended from the union and later asked to resign. His comments to the press reveal one of the reasons why the Plasterers' Society was so often in turmoil:

... it is strangling the men's freedom when a foreman cannot ask his men to work as required legally by the employer, even if it conflicts with union principles ... I told the (management) committee that a foreman cannot serve two bosses, and if the interests of the employer conflicted with those of the union, I would protect the interests of my employer ...

Supported by several employers, Dalton subsequently took the Plasterers' to the SIC, asking it to deregister the union. The full industrial court agreed that some penalties the union imposed on its members were 'illegal ... harsh, and tyrannical' and ordered the union to 'change its attitude'. But, while it deregistered the union, the court at the same time suspended its decision, and a few weeks later annulled it altogether. Thus, while the Plasterers' suffered a legal and moral defeat, it was shaken rather than shattered. It continued to insist that it had a right to discipline its own members and that there was no place in it for anyone who gave their first loyalty to a company rather than the union.

The Plasterers' Society was obviously not a totally united body. As described above, some of the most serious disputes it experienced over these years were the product of conflicts between its management committee and some of its (or other unions') members. When the union, for whatever reason, pulled its members off a site, there were always some who resented the loss of income the stop-work involved, and occasionally a few who would defy the union's directive. On such occasions attendance at general meetings was heavy, with many men unable to fit into the usual venue, the Liquor Trades Union...
Hall in Grote Street. Stormy protests, heated exchanges, and threats and counter-threats filled the air. But throughout his period in office Cavanagh almost always carried the day. By the early 1960s the names of Murphy and Dalton had become an indelible part of the union's turbulent history, and they were referred to bitterly as scabs and traitors. On the other hand Cavanagh was almost a legend - a maverick maybe - but someone who was famous for always putting his members' interests first.

For these reasons alone it would have been easy for Playford to have considered Cavanagh and the Plasterers' as more or less constant lawbreakers. But there were others. Within the UTLC Cavanagh's was possibly the most strident voice from the left. A Plasterers' delegate to it from at least 1944, he made several unsuccessful attempts to be elected onto its executive. On several occasions the UTLC either refused the Plasterers' its support or gave it far less than it had wanted. Cavanagh's uncompromising stance, his constant reference to principle and his and his father's lifelong dedication to the organised labour movement in South Australia earned grudging respect. But in the 1940s and 1950s he was almost always in a minority within the UTLC. Somewhat surprisingly, Playford had won considerable goodwill within the UTLC, most notably for his 'nationalisation' of the Adelaide Electric Supply Company and his granting of three weeks annual leave for South Australia's public servants. "The trade unions liked him", Clyde Cameron later reflected. "People always felt he was trying to be fair." On some counts, Playford enjoyed better relations with Trades Hall than did Cavanagh.

Cavanagh's reputation as a disruptive and even dangerous radical was reinforced by a series of events that, more than any other, brought him into national focus. There is a certain congruity in the fact that both the Chifley Labor government (in 1948) and the Menzies L-CP government (in 1950 and 1954) refused him entry into the remote Woomera rocket range. Cavanagh wanted to visit the range to see the plasterers there and inspect the conditions under which they worked. Why was he refused? There is no doubt that he was well known to the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation and hence to the federal government. Apart from opposing the establishment of the rocket range, he had discouraged men from going to outback Woomera by pointing out that 'they could obtain employment in established country centres with all the amenities of city life'.

But, given that these prohibitions were laid down during the depths of the Cold War, the most credible explanation was because of Cavanagh's association with communism and communists. Although never a member of the Australian Communist Party, Cavanagh supported many policies the Communist party espoused and the Labor party rejected, rubbed shoulders with communists on the union's management committee, and on principle doggedly opposed any attempts to ban communists from the membership of the Plasterers' Society. A federal government of any political persuasion would have been convinced that anything Cavanagh learned from a trip to Woomera would eventually be gleaned from him by his communist associates. That made him 'a security risk', a perception undoubtedly shared by Playford.

The beginning of the 1960s saw relations between the South Australian government and the Plasterers' Society at their worst. Throughout the 1950s Cavanagh had led or served on many deputations to Playford, several to do with the materials used in Housing Trust homes. Although he later claimed that 'every deputation I went with to Playford, he did all the talking and those on the deputation never got a chance to say anything', these protests seem to have had some effect. In 1959, by which time some ten people over the years had been burned to death in them, the Housing Trust ceased building temporary homes. But Playford, it is reported, ultimately refused to receive any delegations of which Cavanagh was a member.
There were signs, too, that by this time the state government was playing a more active role in resisting the Plasterers'. In 1962, for instance, when the union was seeking a new state award for country plasterers and terrazzo workers, the Public Service Commissioner took the unusual step of intervening in the hearing before the SIC 'because some building unions regarded this as a test case'. His representative argued that any decision on the case 'should not necessarily flow' on to workers in industries other than the building trades. By this time, too, the state government was increasingly using imported wall boards - such as gyprock - in preference to fibrous plaster. The Plasterers' undoubtedly believed that this was designed to avoid the use of plasterers, to their obvious detriment. But if this were so, critics believed the Plasterers' had only themselves to blame. The reasons for the increasing use of 'substitute boards', claimed Dalton, were the Plasterers' restrictive practices (such as trade-testing) which were 'designed to keep the trade short of labor' when there was a labour shortage and 'an abundance of work'.

A general assessment

Both Playford and the Plasterers' Society enjoyed their heyday in the 1940s and 1950s. By the early 1960s Labor had so eroded Playford's majority in the House of Assembly that it was within one or two seats of securing the Treasury benches for itself. From March 1962 Playford retained government only with the aid of a single Independent; after March 1965 he lost even this smallest of advantages, and his government fell. Aged 70, he retired from parliament, and to a large extent from public life, in 1966.

The early 1960s, too, saw the beginning of the end of the Plasterers' Society. Almost unexpectedly, in October 1960, Cavanagh won Labor preselection for the third but still safe place on its Senate ticket. In July 1962 he took up his seat in the Senate and was re-elected to it several times over the next twenty years. He did not, however, turn his back on the union that had, without doubt, given him the most satisfying years of his adult life. Without his leadership the Plasterers' Society was plunged into factional strife and relative ineffectiveness. In the winter of 1963, while still finding his way around federal parliament, Cavanagh was obliged to resume the secretaryship for several months. Although he attended union meetings throughout the 1960s, he became a federal government minister in December 1972 and was prevented by an increased workload from fully retaining the connection. In any case, changes in the plaster trades in the 1960s spelled the end of plastering as it had been known. In the 1980s the Plasterers' Society lost its separate identity when it was absorbed into the giant Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU).

How, then, should the Plasterers' Society be remembered? To employers in the building industry it was more than a nuisance; it was a constant threat to free enterprise. What it did was nothing less than sabotage. To some builders and manufacturers, of course, it might even
have meant their ruin, although we have no way of knowing; the claim was seldom if ever made. To many trade unionists the Plasterers' Society was their champion, the spearhead of an ongoing campaign for better wages and conditions for workers in the building and ultimately other trades. To at least a few members of the Plasterers' itself it was a closed shop, acting in a bullying and tyrannical way. To the Playford government it was something to be endured, a constant threat to the state's economy and a discordant note in the generally harmonious tune of South Australia's industrial progress.

Certainly, it is difficult to imagine a trade union narrative of this sort at any other time in the state's history. But in the immediate post-war period the moment was propitious, the opportunities waiting to be seized. Without the expansion of the economy of South Australia and the growth in population, government promotion of secondary industry and the prioritising of housing for low-income earners, and finally the need for their skills, the Plasterers' could never have achieved such a place in the state's history. That they did owes as much to Cavanagh's ideology and militancy as it does to Playford's vision and his longevity as premier of South Australia. Historians of this period of the state's political and economic history need to appreciate that there are more perspectives on 'Playford's South Australia' than have hitherto been provided.93

Endnotes
1 Malcolm Saunders, a Flinders graduate, is a lecturer at Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, where he teaches Australian, American and European history. His research interests include biography, peace, military, labour and South Australian history.
7 Cockburn, p.174; Advertiser, 2 June 1951, p.3.
10 The union changed its name several times over the decades. Among its other names were the Operative Plasterers' Federation and the Plasterers' Federation of South Australia. For most of the period under review it was the Plasterers' Society of South Australia.
11 While Cavanagh is discussed (or, more often, mentioned in passing) in many works dealing with federal politics in the 1970s, there is no scholarly study of him. However, short biographical essays will appear in forthcoming volumes of the Australian Dictionary of Biography and the Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate.
13 No history of the Plasterers' Society of South Australia has been written. The files of the Plasterers' Federation of South Australia 1924-1972 are held in the State Library of South Australia (SRG 723). In these endnotes, the files are referred to as those of the Plasterers' Society.
14 Plasterers' Society, Minutes, General meeting, 13 January 1947. But see also Advertiser, 9 November 1946, p.7 (which, almost certainly incorrectly, puts the figure at a mere 160).
16 Unless otherwise indicated, all information in the following paragraphs comes from Transcript, tapes 1-2.
17 Just when Cavanagh became a plasterer is unclear. In 1959 he apparently claimed that he had been in the union for 28 years, that is, since about 1931 (Advertiser, 20 February 1959, p.23). However, the Plasterers' files record him as having been admitted to membership of the society in May 1938, at which time he would have been 24 (Plasterers' Society, Minutes, Special meeting, 9 May 1938).
Cavanagh and the Plasterers' Society

This follows the distinction drawn by Martin Ceadel between a pacifist, who believes that participation and support for war is always wrong, and a 'pacific-ist', who believes that war can not only be prevented but also abolished, although in the meantime finding some wars permissible (M. Ceadel, Thinking about Peace and War, OUP, Oxford, 1989, pp.5, 121-130). Cavanagh could best be described as a socialist pacifist.

18 Transcript, tape 1, side 2, p.19.
19 Transcript, tape 1, side 2, pp.21-22.
20 *Port Pirie Recorder*, 30 July-18 August 1941. See especially 4 August 1941, p.2.
21 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD), Representatives, 26-26 October 1961, pp.2503-2518, especially pp.2507 and 2510.
22 Plasterers' Society, Minutes, Quarterly meeting, 22 October 1945.
24 Transcript, tape 2, side 2, p.21.
26 Much of my appreciation of the Plasterers' Society comes from discussions with and letters from Terry Carroll, who knew Cavanagh well throughout the last forty years of the latter's life. A plasterer in the 1950s, Carroll was vice-president of the Plasterers' Society from 1961. His oral testimony has been invaluable.
27 The author has read, using the *Advertiser's index*, every issue of this newspaper between 1945 and 1963 in which Cavanagh and/or the Plasterers' Society is mentioned.
31 Plasterers' Society, Minutes, Quarterly meeting, 12 July 1948; Minutes, Annual summon meeting, 6 February 1956; Minutes, Quarterly summon meeting, 7 May 1956; *Advertiser*, 29 July 1948, p.3; 16 October 1951, p.11; 17 October 1952, p.3; 23 February 1955, p.19; 7 April 1955, p.3; 24 May 1955, p.1; 12 July 1955, p.16; 2 August 1955, p.7; 7 February 1956, p.3.
32 Plasterers' Society, Statement of the management committee, 3 December 1956; Minutes, Management committee meeting, 7 November 1960; Minutes, Annual summon meeting, 20 February 1961; Terry Carroll, eulogy for Jim Cavanagh (Senator) at Port Adelaide Town Hall state funeral, 23 August 1990 (Copy of notes used in author's possession); *Advertiser*, 17 April 1952, p.6; 15 July 1952, p.3; 24 May 1957, p.9; Transcript, tape 2, side 2, pp.19-21.
33 Plasterers' Society, Minutes, Management committee meeting, 25 July 1949; Minutes, General meeting, 13 February 1950; *Advertiser*, 29 October 1948, p.4; 8 March 1950, p.4; 9 March 1950, p.3; 2 May 1950, p.4; 4 July 1950, p.5.
34 *Advertiser*, 19 October 1948, p.3; 29 October 1948, p.4.
35 Plasterers' Society, Minutes, Management committee meeting, 25 July 1949; Minutes, General meeting, 13 February 1950; *Advertiser*, 29 October 1948, p.4; 8 March 1950, p.4; 9 March 1950, p.3; 2 May 1950, p.4; 4 July 1950, p.5.
37 Plasterers' Society, Minutes, Management committee meeting, 16 October 1957; Carroll, eulogy.
38 *Advertiser*, 26 January 1945, p.8.
40 Plasterers' Society, Minutes, Management committee meeting, 21 July 1949; *Advertiser*, 25 July 1949, p.3; 27 July 1949, p.3; 2 August 1949, p.3; 8 August 1949, p.1; 9 August 1949, p.3; 12 August 1949, p.1 and 4; 14 October 1949, p.5.
41 *Advertiser*, 6 June 1950, p.1; Moss, p.369.
46 K. Bridge, 'Jim Cavanagh, interviewed by Ken Bridge'. This is a tape, made about 1983, of an interview between the above. A copy of the tape was kindly given me by Cavanagh's daughter, Patricia; CPD, *Senator*, 21 August 1990, pp.1793, 1797.
49 'We are', Cavanagh told a meeting of plasterers, 'custodians of an art as old as civilisation' (Plasterers' Society, Minutes, Special management committee meeting, 17 February 1947). See also Minutes, Special summon meeting, 3 March 1952; *Advertiser*, 14 June 1957, p.18.
50 Plasterers' Society, Minutes, Management committee meeting, 7 November 1955.
51 *Advertiser*, 19 February 1947, p.4.

Advertiser, 4 December 1948, p.3.

Advertiser, 13 March 1953, p.3; 18 March 1953, p.3; 1 April 1953, p.3; 15 August 1953; p.11; 11 September 1953, p.3; 3 November 1953, p.4; 19 February 1957, p.6.


'SA unions will back ACTU', Advertiser, 9 July 1955.

Advertiser, 15 October 1946, p.7; 19 November 1946, p.1; 11 February 1947, p.3; 22 December 1949, p.3; 3 February 1955, p.4.

Advertiser, 16 November 1959, p.6.

Advertiser, 27 August 1946, p.7.

Advertiser, 24 February 1948, p.1; 3 April 1948, p.5; 29 April 1948, p.5; 18 May 1948, p.3; 24 November 1948, p.8.


Advertiser, 21 November 1959, p.5.

I have not been able to locate a copy of this leaflet. It is not among the Plasterers' Society's files in the SLSA.

'Murphy and others v. Plasterers' Society and others, No. 335 of 1948', Supreme Court of South Australia, The State Reports, South Australia, Law Book Company of Australasia, Sydney, 1949.

Advertiser, 12 February 1958, p.6.


Plasterers' Society, Minutes, Management committee meeting, 5 May 1958. But see all meetings of the Plasterers', of whatever sort, between 5 May 1958 and 11 January 1960.

Advertiser, 6 May 1958, p.6.

Advertiser, 14 November 1958, p.9; 1 May 1959, p.21.

Advertiser, 1 May 1959, p.21.

Advertiser, 1 May 1959, p.21; 1 July 1959, p.10.

K. Bridge, 'Jim Cavanagh, interviewed by Ken Bridge'.

Cockburn, p.167.

Guy, A Life on the Left, p.63.

Reports on and references to the Woomera ban in contemporary sources are prolific. For a good selection see Sydney Morning Herald, 26 August 1948, p.1; Plasterers' Society, Minutes, Management committee meeting, 30 August 1948; Minutes, Quarterly summon meeting, 19 July 1954; Advertiser, 29 October 1948, p.9; 25 May 1954, p.3; 16 July 1954, p.1; 20 July 1954, p.3; Transcript, tape 2, side 2, pp.14-17; tape 7, side 1, pp.11-13.


Ricky Yates, interview, 19 January 2002 (Ricky Yates was a contemporary of Cavanagh and spent many years on the management committee of the Plasterers' Society).

Marsden, p.98.

Marsden, pp.124-126; Buss, p.383.


Advertiser, 19 December 1962, p.28.


Advertiser, 26 July 1961, p.4.

Reid, 'South Australia', p.36.


Advertiser, 14 November 1960, p.9.


Advertiser, 5 June 1963, p.10; Transcript, tape 3, side 2, p.17.


See 'This then is a view, from many angles, of South Australia during the Playford years. We believe that it makes a valuable contribution to South Australian historiography, and hope that it will encourage others to add to and refine the picture' (Playford's South Australia, p.6).