

In the President's Doghouse

By RICHARD R. LINGEMAN

DOG DAYS AT THE WHITE HOUSE. By Traphes Bryant with Frances Spatz Leighton. Illustrated. 343 pages. New York: The Macmillan Company. \$9.95.

The Washington gossip mills provide the city's most lucrative literary export. Despite competition from such massive, direct-from-the-source revelations as the Pentagon Papers or the Presidential transcripts, readers continue to gobble up inside dope from the capital, both personal and political—Dan Rather's "The Palace Guard" and Benjamin Bradlee's "Conversations With Kennedy" being two recent examples. Even the appeal of a respected journalist-historian such as Theodore H. White depends in part upon his weaving intimate scenes at the fount of power into his sweeping narrative.

As befits the hierarchic city of its origin, gossip in Washington has its class distinctions, graded according to the relative distance of the writers from the epicenters of decision-making and the redeeming historical importance of their revelations. At the bottom of the social scale are the burgeoning reminiscences of the White House servant class, of which "Dog Days at the White House" by Traphes Bryant with Frances Spatz Leighton is the latest example.

Began Keeping Diary

Mr. Bryant served as master of the White House hounds for 10 years, beginning in the Kennedy Administration and terminating in 1971, when he retired. Perhaps looking ahead to supplementing his GS-13 pension, Mr. Bryant began keeping a diary during the Johnson tenure. Evidently the White House was something of a literary hot bed; at least he mentions a potential conflict with the retiring head usher, who was planning to write his memoirs, over some Presidential dog pictures Mr. Bryant thought he had sewed up for his book. At any rate, he lined up Merriam Smith, White House correspondent, for collaborative duty; then, after Mr. Smith's death, he latched on to another top name in the field, Frances Spatz Leighton, a veteran chef of this kind of upstairs, downstairs soufflé ("My Thirty Years at the White House," "My Life With Jacqueline Kennedy").

The book consists of Mr. Bryant's gossipy reminiscences about the Presidents he served under, beginning with Harry S. Truman (Mr. Bryant started as a White House electrician, and later the dogkeeping was added to his duties), as well as excerpts from his diary. Reading these excerpts we can sense the challenge Mr. Bryant's collaborator felt. Much of it consists of a sort of White House dogs' social calendar, recording their comings and goings, their shots and trips to the vets, the state of their health and their lively public life, thanks to a Washington press corps always in need of White House dog stories. ("8/24/65 UPI reporter Helen Thomas is trying to find out where Him is and is following up a lead he is romancing some dog in Texas. I'm avoiding the question until the story is cleared by Liz Carpenter.") There is also a reasonable amount of backstairs gossip about the White House's human population, but, as news, the stuff is mostly dog bites man—which White House dogs frequently did, most

notably President Johnson's appealing mutt Yuki, who forthrightly attacked a White House policeman making menacing cracks.

Not the most exciting material in the world, but if he had kept to the dogs Mr. Bryant might have had a nice little book. He seems a nice man who did have a genuine affection for his various charges. Presidential pets have provided more than one footnote to history, and the kind of pet a President has and his relationship to it could provide some minor grist for the psychohistorian's mill.

Calvin Coolidge, for example, had an old alley cat with whom he communed silently for long periods of time—as a respite from officially doing nothing, one presumes Franklin D. Roosevelt's Fala performed a valuable public-relations role, whether as an innocent victim of scurrilous Republican campaign oratory or being made an honorary private after "contributing" one dollar to War Relief.

President Eisenhower's taste ran to Weimaraners and black Anguses. With the Kennedy family, the children's multifarious pets held the spotlight, although the President called for his dog Charlie at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, Mr. Bryant says. Richard M. Nixon's relationship with his Irish setter, King Timahoe, was a revealing one, and a little sad. As Mr. Bryant writes, describing the President's return from a trip: "Tim ran to everybody but the President. It was funny, but the President was really hurt. He winced." Lyndon B. Johnson was the champion White House dog lover, and the dogs loved him right back, which was no doubt what he needed. He once said to Mr. Bryant, "Only a dog can really appreciate everything you do for him"; it was more than he could say for the country.

Gossip and Innuendo

Unfortunately, Mr. Bryant—or rather his collaborator, I suspect—sees fit to fatten his story with rather stale gossip and innuendo, presumably to give the book an R-rating, thus making it more salable. So we have stories about Mr. Kennedy's nude swimming parties while Mrs. Kennedy was away, some catty stuff about White House children and the like. Questions of taste aside, this tends to spoil the tone of Mr. Bryant's otherwise workaday confessions of an honest White House workingman, who did share the limelight frequently with the Presidential pets.

At times, he really strains to appear in the know on larger matters. He speaks of the oppressive atmosphere in the Nixon White House and later tells a funny and legitimately doggy story about H. R. Haldeman's ordering him to cool it on displaying the dogs to the press because they are distracting attention from the President. But he moves beyond such revealing trivialities and feels constrained to say something informative about the Watergate scandals (about which he knew nothing at the time). Thus he can write: "This was the night Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office was broken into, yet all my diary has is that simple statement—'Tim has returned from California.' I don't mean to be snobbish about this, but there's something to be said for servants' knowing their place—in Mr. Bryant's case, the kennels.

See also Herb Caen,
SFChronicle 17 May 74,
this file.