

Books of the Times

By CHARLES POORE

RAYMOND CLAPPER rode the Washington merry-go-round for a quarter of a century, but he never got dizzy on it, never lost his sense of balance. He was one of the ablest and most widely admired newspaper men there. What he said in his column and on the air might win or lose friends, but it generally influenced people because it was written and spoken with stubborn candor. When Raymond Clapper was killed in an airplane crash over the Marshall Islands in the war he left behind a considerable file of notes on men and politics in his time. He had planned to use that material in a book. Olive Ewing Clapper, his wife, has now drawn on it to write "Washington Tapestry,"* a reminiscence of the layered Washington eras they had known since 1917.



Olive Clapper

One could wish that Raymond Clapper's notes were given just as he put them down, and complete, but it's probably still a little early to tell all they contain, just as it's already a little late to recite again stretches of this familiar history. Be that as it may, a good many interesting details of life in that bureaucratic Bagdad are woven into "Washington Tapestry."

We begin in the gray stretches of the Hoover era—"A Worrier at the Helm"—and proceed through the depression, the undertones of war, the overtones of war, the war, to the present, lapsing back, from time to time, to Harding's day, and Calvin Coolidge's. Mr. Hoover, according to Mrs. Clapper, said: "Nobody is actually starving. The hoboes, for example, are better fed than they ever have been. One hobo in New York got ten meals in one day." Clapper said, "Surely, Mr. President, you are not confusing the unemployed with hoboes, are you?" Clapper thought Hoover was "like a man trying to plug a sieve, running from one place to another to stop up leaks which developed faster than he could run."

The banks closed; a new President was inaugurated—"The Miracle Men Move In"—and presently we had the NRA at the sign of the flying Blue Eagle. There was a banking investigation, and Ed Beattie wrote the Clappers from Berlin that it was already unsafe to tell what was actually going on there. People began to take sides between those who thought Hitler really meant what he said in "Mein Kampf" and those who said that was just a lot of hysteria.

Looking farther back, there were notes recalling Armistice Day, 1923, when Woodrow Wilson, broken and ill, came out to speak in the rain to the handful of people who always gathered outside his house on that day. "Just one word

more," Woodrow Wilson said. "I cannot refrain from saying it: I am not one of those who have the least anxiety about the triumph of the principles I have stood for. I have seen fools resist Providence before and I have seen their destruction, as will come upon these again—utter destruction and contempt. That we shall prevail is as sure as that God reigns." Those were his last public words.

Judson Welliver, secretary to both Harding and Coolidge, told Raymond Clapper that he was positive that Coolidge thought his "I do not choose to run" statement was the best way to be renominated. Later on, when Clapper went to see him at Northampton and they were discussing the depression, Coolidge observed that everyone wanted the Government to go into the other fellow's business, but stay out of his own.

Landon was a personal friend of the Clappers. The Republican National Committee hired a specialist in appearances before the camera to teach him to thrust out his chin and snap his head up and "button up a smile." In the summer of 1937 Landon wrote the Clappers from Kansas, recalling a recent evening when he had been working at an oil rig, late at night, hungry and tired, when he suddenly thought: "My God! This time a year ago I was being nominated for President of the United States."

There was the long fight over the Supreme Court, and when Justice Roberts switched his vote on some New Deal legislation someone said: "A switch in time saves nine." Then, so many Washington wits claimed the wisecrack that Raymond Clapper said, "It's a wise crack that knows its own father."

A friend of the Clappers, meeting John L. Lewis for the first time, was surprised to see him smile. "Why do you scowl in all your pictures?" he asked Mr. Lewis. "Scowling is my business," Lewis said. A Washington hostess phoned another friend—in Washington; people's friends always have such interesting anecdotal experiences—and said: "I hear your husband is about to be appointed to a Cabinet post. If that is true, won't you both come to dinner next Tuesday evening? If it isn't true, do come in for coffee afterward."

President Roosevelt told Clapper that he never got over his nervousness before speaking. If you were close enough you could see his hands trembling before he began. Mrs. Roosevelt told about the time she went into a store to buy something and asked the clerk to charge it to Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, the White House, Washington, D. C. The girl took all that down carefully. Then she looked up and asked, "Any room number?"

There are accounts of combative off-the-record talks with Governor Dewey, friendly off-the-record talks with Wendell Willkie, campaign trips and trips overseas, wars abroad and squabbles at home. The fact that we were slow to prepare for this war recalls that we were slow to prepare for all our wars in the past, though we always won them. That is true, but perhaps it's not such a reliable guide any more, because war has now reached such a stage that, unless we use more foresight, we might be some time in finding out just what hit us.

*WASHINGTON TAPESTRY. By Olive Ewing Clapper. 303 pages. Whittlesey. \$2.75.