Donald Britain’s

The King chronicle

At first glance, the life of Mackenzie King might seem to offer a wealth of material for a fascinating, if quirky, story – 22 years as prime minister of Canada while, at various times, consorting with prostitutes, parleying with Hitler, getting regular advice from the dead, and having a dog for closest confidant.

But Donald Britain’s six-hour, three-part docu-drama, The King Chronicle (co-produced by the National Film Board and the CBC), lies steadfastly two-dimensional on the TV screen and refuses to come alive.

Britain’s recounting is based on King’s 12-million-word diary, but the diary, instead of revealing the inner life of an eminent public figure, is, according to Britain’s own description, “stuffed with sanctimonious self-importance. King’s contemporaries called him ‘dull and cerebral’; in Parliament he was known as a bone-crushing bore. (Alliteration, you can tell, is one of Britain’s favorite stylistic devices.)

To make a dull subject interesting is a tempting but dangerous challenge for any artist. Dullness cannot be simply represented, but tempting but dangerous challenge for any artist.

The King Chronicle is as a record of people and events that shaped Canada’s destiny in the 20th century, it is ultimately defeated by its puppety, implacable subject.

King, it seems, was a Dale Carnegie-style opportunist, who, except for his guilt about sex and his lack of ‘image,’ might have been quite at home in our own decade. As a young man he flirted briefly with ideals of social justice, visiting the slums of Chicago, recording his pity for the poor. But this was a brief dalliance on his way to a political career, for it was politics – perhaps not so much the exercise of power as the manoeuvring required to reach such a position – that enthralled him.

At 26, he was a deputy minister; by 33 an M.P., and minister of Labour in Laurier’s government the following year. He became prime minister in 1921, beginning a career of machinations and backroom business that went on. It also deals with some of Canada’s moral failures during this time, such as the internment of the west coast Japanese-Canadians (touched on rather lightly) and the refusal to aid Jews fleeing from the Nazi oppression.

The advantage of using drama in the telling of history ought to be that we can get inside events and characters in a way that a simple piecing together of the facts would not allow. But Britain is an inveterate editorialist; he cannot restrain himself from interpreting and commenting and insulting. His punchy prose and newsread narration style are intrinsically contrary to the fictional mode. At the end of the chronicle, the viewer will certainly know more about the facts and quirks of King’s life but will have none of the satisfaction that comes of being involved in compelling fiction. Britain refuses to embellish the known. So why didn’t he make a straight-on documentary?

Ralph Friesen