

Donald Brittain's  
**The King  
chronicle**

**A**t 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 Brittain'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.

Brittain'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 Brittain's own description, "stuffed with sanctimonious self-importance." King's contemporaries called him "dull and devious"; in Parliament he was known as a bone-crushing bore. (Alliteration, you can tell, is one of Brittain'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 must be somehow transformed, through contrast or context, into something of dramatic import. Valuable as *The King Chronicle* is as a record of people and events that shaped Canada's destiny in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is ultimately defeated by its pudgy, 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 maneuvering required to reach such a position – that enchanted 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 leadership that depended on offending as few Canadians as possible while cautiously pulling away from British dominance. King actually took the British on in fierce debate at the little-known Imperial Conference in London in 1923, and set Canada on an independent course in foreign policy. He would not allow the Canadian press to report on these events, however, because he was afraid of annoying diehard imperialists at home.

King's success at the conference was proof



PHOTO: RON DIAMOND

**Forsaking his dog, MacKenzie King (Sean McCann) consults with spiritualist Emma Wreidt (Kay Tremblay)**

that he could rise above the wishy-washy when inspired. For him as an individual and for Canada as a country the conference was pivotal – but even so, a conference is a conference, and Brittain's extended attention to the proceedings is far too much for all but the most avid of Canadian history buffs.

King lost the 1930 election, having "reduced the crash of '29 to a tedious debate over federal-provincial jurisdictions." He sat opposite R. B. Bennett in Parliament and saw numerical significance in the Conservatives' seating arrangement; a visit to an Ottawa medium meanwhile, assured him that he would be restored to power. And so he was in 1935, with the catchy slogan, "King or Chaos."

Equivocal as ever, he committed Canada to the war effort in 1939, but was vague on the most volatile domestic issue, declaring: "Conscription if necessary, but not necessarily conscription."

When he visited Canadian troops in 1941 they refused to listen to his address, shouting him down with an assortment of four-letter insults. While this is certainly based on historical fact, the dramatic rendering is shocking and almost incredible, perhaps because the viewer has not been prepared, and much of what has gone on before is dry and passionless. What had King done to evoke such a display of naked animosity?

It calls to mind an earlier scene in which King, then leader of the opposition, visits the Byward Market and beds a prostitute. Lunging and grunting, he climaxes; wincing and cringing, the viewer averts his gaze. You get so used to seeing

King snug and respectable in his three-piece suit that his sweaty flesh is somehow an affront. Granted that King led a double life, too often the *Chronicle* does not succeed in making it psychologically or dramatically probable, so some of the transitions just don't work.

This is also the problem with the other aspect of King's private life, that is, his faith in mediums. Ironically, these scenes don't seem shocking enough. To an audience jaded by *Poltergeist*, *Witchboard* and the like, King's mediums seem like harmless, dotty old ladies and the spirits themselves so faint and vague that it's impossible to imagine that King seriously believed in them.

There is a level on which *The King Chronicle* is a success – and that is, as a chronicle. Painstakingly, Brittain takes us through the events of King's life and times, intercutting the dramatized re-creation with actual footage of events. Canada moved decisively toward nationhood while King was prime minister; *The King Chronicle* faithfully records the political 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 Brittain is an inveterate editorialist; he cannot restrain himself from interpreting and

commenting and insulting. His punchy prose and newsreel 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. Brittain refuses to embellish the known. So why didn't he make a straight-on documentary?

Ralph Friesen •

THE KING CHRONICLE *d. / w. / narr.* Donald Brittain. *p.* Adam Symansky. *d. o. p.* Savas Kalogeras. *cam.* Susan Trow. *pic. ed.* Rita Roy, Roger Hart. *asst.* René Pothier. *p. des.* Robert Hackborn. *art. d.* Denis Boucher. *orig. treatment* Ronald Blumer, Donald Brittain. *cast.* Marsha Chesley. *sd. rec.* Hans Oomes. *sd. ed.* Les Halman, Bill Graziadei, Raymond Vermette. *re-rec.* Jean-Pierre Joutel, Adrian Croll. *M.* Eldon Rathburn, Milan Kymlicka. *m. rec.* Louis Hone. *m. ed.* Julian Olson. *p. man.* Marcel Malacket. *loc. man.* Céline Daignault. *cont.* Claudette Messier. *gaffer* François Warot. *grip* François Dupéré. *makeup* Geryl Wraith. *tech. coor.* Richard Bujold. *a. d.* Joanne Malo. *i. p.* Sean McCann, Gary Reineke, Marion Gilsean, Robert Benson, Richard Farrell, Patricia Collins, Michael Kirby, Jason Dean, Albert Millaire, John W. Carroll, Doris Petrie, David Hughes, Christopher Newton, Stephanie Morgenstern, Trevor John, Harry Hill, Arthur Grosser, Barrie Baldaro, John Bayliss, Christina Kaya, James Bradford, Les Lye, John Friesen, Jean Belcourt, Donna Farron, Terence La Brosse, Damir Andrei, Gordon Jocelyn, George Merner, Tom Harvey, Marion Gilsean, R. H. Thomson, Kay Tremblay, Daved Gardner, Sandy Webster, John Friesen, Shawn Lawrence, Robin Bowditch, Robert Welch, Doris Petrie, Jim McNabb, John W. Carroll, John Koensgon, Henry Ramer, Nicolas Hrtschan, Helga Schmitz, Babs Gadbois, Jack Rider, Henry Ramer, Len Watt, Gordon Jocelyn, Gerard Parkes, Robert Higden, Philip Pretten, Dean Hagopian, Terry Haig, Norris Domigue, Tom Harvey, Barry Edward Blake, Doris Petrie, Mark Brennan, Yves Dubreuil, Chuck Collins, James Rae, Bob Girolami, Aline Vandine, Steve Michaels, Richard Zeman, Bernie McManus, Teddy Lee Dillon.