

Duelling mini-series



TONY ATHERTON

"The Hudson's Bay had no visual history. It had 64 tonnes of docu-

neers and pathfinders and settlers confronted when they came from crowded, war-torn Europe to this awesome emptiness."

The original art looks sometimes like illustrations from a child's textbook, sometimes like National Geographic artist's conceptions, and occasionally like N.C. Wyeth paintings. They lack some of the drama that real archival material might have brought to the series, which also suffers a bit from packing so much information in

a mere four hours. At times you wish for little less narrative and a little more perspective.

But overall, *Empire of the Bay* tells a compelling tale of a land created largely from a desire to wring profit from the untamed wilderness, and of men who owe their first allegiance to the Company.

This idea of corporate manifest destiny is also at the heart of *The Cola Conquest*, but Angelico's film series is as much about sociology as history.

"Looking at America through the lens of Coca-Cola, you see 100 years of evolution of everything that's part of America's influence, which is now world-wide."

The Cola Conquest deals with the birth of advertising, the deification of image, the rise of consumerism, and the world-wide marketing of the American Dream.

It is, says Angelico, "a fun but serious way of looking at the issues of the 20th century."

But it was less fun for Angelico when she realized that Coca-Cola was not going to co-operate with her, had in fact declared her persona non grata, and instructed its employees world-wide to keep her film crews off company property.

Angelico tells a story about what happened when co-producer Amy Webb accompanied a crew to the Atlanta Olympic Games.

Among the thousands of accredited media at the Olympics, she was sought

out by a Coca-Cola company representative who made it clear Webb and her crew were not welcome in Coke's hometown.

The Coca-Cola people are naturally reticent, says Angelico; it comes from being No. 1, and very protective of its image, which is the company's primary asset.

But the Coke people were especially stand-offish with the producers of *The Cola Conquest* because the film is inspired by Mark Pendergrast's book, *For God, Country and Coca-Cola*. The company had co-operated with Pendergrast, but not been happy with what he came up with.

The documentary series covers some of the same contentious territory, like the compromises Coke made to keep sales high in Nazi Germany, the controversy over the company's response to the assassination of 12 union organizers at bottling plants in Guatemala, and the well-recorded early use of cocaine in the soft drink's original recipe, which the company still denies.

"We were not out to attack the company," insists Angelico, a onetime NFB-Studio 2 film-maker whose previous works includes the award-winning Holocaust film, *Dark Lullabies*. "It wasn't a Roger & Me-type documentary attacking the big corporation. We tried to take a fair look at the company."

Taking a fair look at the company proved more difficult without Coke's

co-operation. Trying to give the film an insider's feel despite this setback cost Angelico an extra year of production.

While there are no Coke executives in the film, there are some former Coke employees, and the great-granddaughter of the company's founder, Asa Candler.

Candler was the man who turned John Pemberton's formula for a "brain tonic" into a national obsession. Tonight's program provides a fascinating look at that process, how advertising has been used by both Coke and Pepsi in the past century.

Subsequent episodes look at the effects of the escalating cola wars on world politics, and the globalization of American pop culture.

It also finds time to address Coca-Cola's most blatant lapse in marketing savvy: New Coke.

"What they forgot from their own history was that they were selling image and nostalgia much more than they were selling taste," says Angelico.

Festival screenings of the film suggest that Coca-Cola Ltd. worried needlessly about the fallout from the series.

Despite the film's persistent and fascinating deconstruction of the Coca-Cola myths, it can't undo generation of brainwashing.

"At the end of the show, a lot of people told us they wanted to go out for a hamburger and a Coke," says Angelico. "This was definitely not our intention."



The Cola Conquest is a bold attempt to demystify Coca-Cola, one of America's most secretive and successful corporations, as well as explain the reasons behind the cola wars.