

How to make a documentary in a culture war

Channel 5's new series on Churchill looks at our revered leader amid a new revisionist wave, writes *Jake Kerridge*

Back in 2015, there was a very funny TV sketch in which the spoof documentary-maker Philomena Cunk interviewed a historian about Winston Churchill. "He was quite overweight and he smoked and drank a lot... How good a role model do you think he really was," she asked, "if you don't look at the fact that he won the War?"

Half a dozen years on, however, not looking at the fact that Churchill won the War seems to have become a widespread approach to assessing his legacy. As the culture wars rage, activists want to topple his statue and academics want to topple his reputation, arguing that his racism and his support for an oppressive imperialist ideology should dominate our view of him, with his role in the defeat of the genocidal Nazi regime being consigned to the footnotes.

At this febrile time, one could be forgiven for worrying that Channel 5's new six-part documentary on Churchill might take the Cunk approach. Happily, though, the series is terrific – the latest in a run of excellent original content from the channel, which is really staking its claim at last as a serious broadcaster – and although it examines Churchill's views on race in more depth than previous documentaries, it also presents him as an inspirational figure.

"We made a conscious decision to listen to what people were saying about Churchill," says director Chris Durlacher. "Churchill spent his whole life opining, telling people what he thought about this or that, and our judgment about whether or not he was right or wrong in those opinions can, does and should change – history doesn't stand still. That's not to say we're judging him, but we're reflecting what we think now about the things he said and did."

There is less tolerance today than there was even a year ago for some of Churchill's views: the belief in the inferiority of non-white peoples, the dismissal of the hunger-striking



Churchill (top) had strong views on Gandhi (top right), argues filmmaker Chris Durlacher (right). Historian Andrew Roberts (above) says the issue is complex

Gandhi as "a bad man and an enemy of the Empire". Last September, the National Trust included Churchill's family home, Chartwell, in a dossier of sites linked to "colonialism and slavery", citing the ex-PM's role in the Bengal famine and his opposition to Indian independence.

These debates influenced the choice of contributors to the Channel 5 programme. There are familiar figures such as Churchill's granddaughter Celia Sandy, but also people from whom you wouldn't necessarily expect to hear in a Churchill biography, says Durlacher. "We thought it was important to bring in a RAME perspective – the perspective of the colonised, not just the coloniser."

"In episode one, we've got Priya Atwal, who is a very interesting young historian, giving us the context of the attitudes to Empire that people like Churchill would have been brought up with, and how it affected their views. And in episode three, the historian Diya Gupta talks about Churchill's attitude to India and to Gandhi."

Of course, some viewers will find that they disagree with various

interpretations of Churchill's views. In the programme, Dr Atwal's assertion that "Churchill most definitely viewed himself as racially superior to so-called native people in India, and I think we can see that as a fundamentally racist ideology" is the unchallenged last word on the subject.

The historian and Churchill biographer Andrew Roberts tells me that if he had been invited to contribute to the programme, he would have offered a contrasting view. "I'll tell you what he viewed himself as – he thought of himself as having a duty to better the lives of, and to protect, the native inhabitants of India. That's not about superiority or inferiority."

But it may simply be the case that we can't look to television documentaries for an exploration of contrasting theories about the ins and outs of complex historical figures. "Television is very good at telling a story. It's less good at nuance," says the media historian, Professor James Chapman.

"TV producers on the whole don't like a roundtable discussion, they think viewers regard them as boring,

and so the opportunity for discussion and disagreement about complicated figures is much reduced. Historical television wants a coherent narrative. Even Jeremy Isaacs, who produced *The World at War* [the revered Seventies documentary series on the Second World War] more or less admitted that that was what they did: they settled on an interpretation and then they chose material to fit it."

Roberts agrees that, although there have been some nuanced documentaries about complex figures, in general, television has to simplify.

"Having made quite a few TV series myself – you have to compress. All that television can do, really, if it's been done well, is to spark people's interest, whet the appetite of the public, so that they go and buy serious works of history or biography. If they don't do that, nine times out of 10 they'll come away with a historically skewed view of whatever it was the programme was about."

The problem, Roberts suggests, is not so much



'If I were a young history don, I would worry about sounding un-PC on camera'

simplification as the possibility that documentaries will all simplify in the same way.

"There is a new element of conformity. If I was an up-and-coming history don at one of the universities, I would worry deeply about saying something that might be deemed un-PC on camera. It can be a career-ender."

"I think we're going to see endless box-tick woke stuff, not because it needs to be said yet again, but because you fear that you'll come under attack if you don't go through the motions."

As Chapman points out, though, historical documentaries have always reflected the concerns of the time in which they are made. "In the Sixties, they might have focused more on the subject's relation to class. Twenty years ago or so, the focus might have been on gender. Today the focus is on racism and imperialism, and in 50 years it might be more to do with how people viewed the environment."

As for Durlacher, he insists that the new Churchill series has not been "hijacked" by modish concerns. "I just think it's healthy to re-examine what we were taught as children, and analyse whether it was prejudiced. For some people I'm sure this might be painful, but I think it's a process we all should go on, even if it might mean having to reassess much-cherished ideas."

And a much-cherished person? "Yes, but I think Churchill will come out of this series just as cherished, if not more... We respect him throughout, we're not bashing him at all, we're looking at his strengths as well as his weaknesses."

"We're not trying to make him more controversial – and anyway I don't think he's as controversial a figure now as he was when he was alive. Just more complicated. And that's more interesting."



Churchill begins tonight at 9pm on Channel 5

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