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DIEFENBAKER

Definitive biography explores dark side of ex-prime minister

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Some day, we hope, John Diefenbaker will be remembered more for his accomplishments than his personality.

Some day. Not yet.

In his new book, the definitive biography of Canada's 13th prime minister, Denis Smith does not shy away from Dief's dark side. In fact, he runs with it as far as he can.

And that's quite a ways, because Diefenbaker was emotional, ego-driven and paranoid. And that was just on the surface; the truly scary stuff was hidden underneath.

Smith recounts the times when Diefenbaker — the leader of the country — would blow up at subordinates because of perceived slights. He carried his cabinet on an emotional roller-coaster ride that translated into a confused, childish public image. That, in turn, ensured that the huge majority handed the Progressive Conservatives in 1958 could not be repeated as long as Dief was still the Chief.

By the end of his reign as prime minister in 1963, the party had no cohesive strategy on anything. Desperate MPs put together platforms of all sorts, hoping to fill the void at the top. It didn't work, and the Liberals took power with a weaker, but much more stable, man at the helm.

Dief hung on to the Tory party for as long as he could, setting the stage for internal bickering — and backstabbing — that lasted for years after he finally was pushed out.

His home life was no better. His first wife, Edna, died of leukemia in 1951. Smith writes of suffering that had started much earlier, much before the onset of her illness. Again, John's insensitivity and self-centred approach were the problem.

But what of Diefenbaker's accomplishments? They're here, too, buried under the flood of anecdotes about Dief's emotional instability.

Think of perseverance, and Diefenbaker must come to mind. The man was defeated in five elections before he finally gained a seat in the House

ROGUE TORY: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker, by Denis Smith (Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 702 pages, \$40).

of Commons. Think of charisma — the man had an abundance of it. In 1958, he brought the country together in a personality-based election-win like Canada had never seen before.

Once in office, Diefenbaker didn't shy away from the tough decisions. He approved a joint Canada-United States air defence program and killed the Avro Arrow, a domestic fighter plane.

He sold wheat to China and revitalized Western agriculture. He gave Indians the right to vote. And he opened the door to meaningful northern development.

Diefenbaker also gave the nation the Canadian Bill of Rights, despite complaints from the special-interest groups that wanted special status.

Through it all, Diefenbaker had to fight the demons within that both drove him to the top and destroyed his chances of staying there.

Smith had unprecedented access to archives in gathering material for this book.

He used them to compile a volume devoted more to internal party bickering in Ottawa than to the government actions that affected those outside the inner circle.

Take the Columbia River Treaty, for instance. The deal with the Americans changed the face of British Columbia, and has been under attack for years.

It was negotiated during the Diefenbaker years, but there are only passing references to it here. It could be that the Chief was not directly involved — but if that's the case, it should be spelled out.

Of course, that would have added to an already weighty volume. This book is already so thick it's tough to read without getting sore hands.

It's just too bad more attention couldn't have been given to the man's qualities.

(Obee is a Herald writer.)