

A blurred reflection

BY PETER O'BRIEN
For The Financial Post

It is possible to marvel at the expansiveness of a writer's interests and intellectual ambitions yet still be frustrated at the lack of depth of his analysis and the slipperiness of his conclusions. *Reflections of a Siamese Twin* — part philosophical treatise, part historical reclamation, part diatribe — is a profoundly exasperating book. At times it is original, provocative and insightful. At other times it is ponderous, glib and nebulous.

While reading, I often wanted John Ralston Saul to push the line of reasoning further, to chew on an idea with more than just passing rhetorical flourish. Despite weighing in at more than 500 pages, many of the book's contentions are not adequately explored and the language is either vague or redundant.

Toward the end of the book this becomes particularly taxing as Saul depends too many times on such phrases as "So let me repeat," "As I said earlier," and "I keep repeating."

The argument of the book is that the country is complex, or as Saul says, "While all countries are complex, the central characteristic of the Canadian state is its complexity."

Although not particularly original (other writers, including Philip Stratford, Stanley Fogel and Herschel Hardin have examined similar terrain) this is a worthy point of departure. The problem is that Saul often settles for finding synonyms for complexity rather than elaborating on his argument. Among the words he uses to describe the country and its sensibilities are "atypical," "non-linear," "uncontrolled," "non-mono-cultural," "nuanced," "very much its own invention," "living on several levels at once," "a country of the imagination" and "a permanently incomplete experiment."

Perhaps the very nature of this contention is that it cannot be fully articulated, for by doing so belittles the argument.

But other writers, among them Harold Innis and Margaret Atwood, have demonstrated the contradictory nature of Canada by doing more than finding a mountainous collec-

tion of synonyms.

The complexity of Canada is seen, says Saul, throughout our geography, history, federal-provincial relations and language policy, among other elements of our society. The country is built upon a variety of conflicting impulses — a desire to break free from a colonial mindset yet still look to other countries for economic and cultural validation; an east-west impulse versus north-south pressures — that have demanded we cope with healthy doses of balance and doubt.

As a people, we are forever dependant upon our imaginations to survive in such a massive, northern land. The country is not unlike a set of Siamese twins: one body but two distinct, interrelated personalities. For Saul, the two main inseparable entities are the French and the English. As Jacques Godbout says in his novel *Les Têtes à Papineau*, one of the principal inspirations for this book: "You can't commit suicide if you have two heads."

The book's ambition is nothing less than to present a historical and cultural analysis of how we got to where we are and how we might continue this noble experiment that is Canada.

Woven throughout are swaths of history, including new or feisty assessments of Louis-Hippolyte La-Fontaine and Robert Baldwin ("the original Siamese twins"), Wilfrid Laurier, Lucien Bouchard and Mike Harris, among many others. There is also an array of perambulations through various topics: education, economics, visual art, hockey, mythology, language and so on.

At times Saul's conclusions are just too quick, as though he does not need to prove his point and it is merely up to the reader to believe him and nod in agreement. That Saul wants the world to be so does not make it so.

Is it true that the country has

Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century By John Ralston Saul, Viking, 546 pp., \$36.99

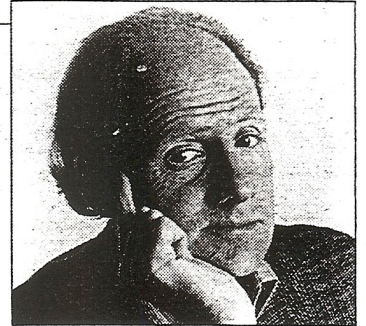
had "a long, relatively stable coexistence with the Natives;" or that we "use novels, essays, even poetry, to set the imaginative agenda of the society;" or that painters from F.H. Varley to David Milne "look at their own landscape without artifice;" or the "very form of the country is an anti-utopia"? Readers will find problems with each of these pronouncements, but Saul far too easily presents them as inspired wisdom.

There are also a few genuinely curious ideas here.

I still do not understand how the country would be better off if there were a series of northern provinces. His theory that with "18 or so provinces the internal national debate would have been drawn upwards towards the centre of the country" seems to me a little oxygen deprived.

Despite these troubles, the strength of the book is precisely this bravado, this desire to imaginatively redefine the country to suit a set of higher ideals than those traditionally possessed by politicians and what Saul refers to as "elites."

Saul's respect for culture in all its forms is rare in our public debate, and admirable. He quotes extensively from a vast range of writers and artists, including B.P. Nichol, George Bowering, Emily Carr and Paul-Emile Borduas.



Saul: Respect for culture.

Very few thinkers can demonstrate with such confidence that culture "is an uncontrollable, indefinable sea in which all of us swim."

Saul should also be lauded for his singular energy at attempting to help us define the country with all its disparate pressures, and for articulating the historical ignorance of current politicians. His challenge to corporations and elites, discussed in his earlier works *The Unconscious Civilization* and *Voltaire's Bastards*, is also grist for the mind and a challenge we may as a people be already too lazy or numb to counter.

Perhaps the fact there is so much to argue with, so much to infuriate the reader, proves that the book is a powerful, profound and challenging work.

But in its discussion of the messy, ragged qualities of Canadian democracy *Reflections of a Siamese Twin* is itself often messy and ragged.

Peter O'Brien is a Toronto editor and writer.