

DOUBT NOT THIS WIT!

The Doubters Companion. A Dictionary of Aggressive Common Sense

John Ralston Saul

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THE FIRST four pages of this "dictionary" are taken up with six entries. A: A BIG MAC; A LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU; AARON; ABASEMENT; ABELARD. We know at once we are dealing with a humourist, a man of today, a scholar and, probably, a philosopher. Had we already read Voltaire's *Bastards*, also by J.R. Saul, we would expect to be in for a treat. We would not be disappointed.

There are the pithy juxtapositions to be found in entries such as ACCEPTANCE SPEECH: "The triumph of banality over ego"; FREEDOM: "An unoccupied space which must be re-occupied every day"; NAFTA: "Not a free trade agreement"; and YACHT: "One of the belongings from which a press BARON can fall and drown when the relationship between his INFERIORITY COMPLEX and his BANKER is no longer viable."

Like many a good dictionary, this one makes plain where further words of helpful explanation are to be found in the same volume by capitalizing them. CAPITALISM is defined as CORPORATISM but the pithy definition of each of these expands to five or six pages of illuminating history and up-to-date comment that it would be unlawful even for a reviewer to reproduce.

Saul is a Canadian, a circumstance that lends point to his definition of ANGLO-SAXONS: "A racial group composed mainly of Celts, Chinese, Germans, Italians, Ukrainians, French and other peoples who have been conquered by or immigrated to the English-speaking world. To blame for everything. See: XENOPHOBIA (PASSIVE)."

Saul notes that in the 20th Century people turn to the standard dictionaries "not to challenge themselves, but to be reassured." Obviously, he is close to Orwell who, in 1948, warned we would be, by 1984, robbed of our language. Saul wants us to reclaim the language "from the structures of conventional wisdom and expertise."

To help us, he follows the approach of Diderot's *Encyclopedie*, an analysis of civilization which "looked not backwards but forwards through innovative ideas." Even more, Saul takes the pattern of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (which evidently is full of "fightin' words", definitions more elegantly described by Saul as "weapons of portable and flexible linguistic guerrilla warfare.")

As Voltaire does, J.R. Saul calls us to doubt, not to take ourselves too seriously, to remain human.

A questioning attitude is nurtured

by humour. Comedy is at times the only outlet for questioning, whether in the form of street theatre or rude limericks as in 18th century England, or in 20th century Russia in the cartoons of Krokodil.

Above all, Saul calls for balance. "Civilizations do best where they engage in careful freedom and careful balance." The discussion under LEVEL PLAYING FIELD would suggest itself here. However, this very modern cliche turns out to be an irony, as does the entry under PEACE DIVIDEND.

It is among the satisfying features of *The Doubter's Companion* that along with provocative propositions, clever contrasts and plain fun, there is good history, commonsense observation, and properly identified sourcing for esoteric quotations and debatable "facts". We learn, for instance, that the THINK TANK is a "growth industry" that now involves 226 important think tanks in the United States, 67 in the United Kingdom, 46 in Germany, 42 in France and 42 in Japan. The source of this data is listed in the Notes. If we doubt Saul we can at least easily check many of his references.

A quick skimming of *The Doubter's Companion* might cause a reader to conclude that J.R. Saul is a cynic. That would be a mistake. He is caustic but he is a humanist. His prods and pricks are meant to make people think, to think their way out of a "linguistic prison." And like Rene-Daniel Dubois, whom he quotes with approval, he is "not interested in a world in which to be human is a weakness."

This is a great Companion. Open it anywhere for instruction and pleasure.

MARY RAWSON