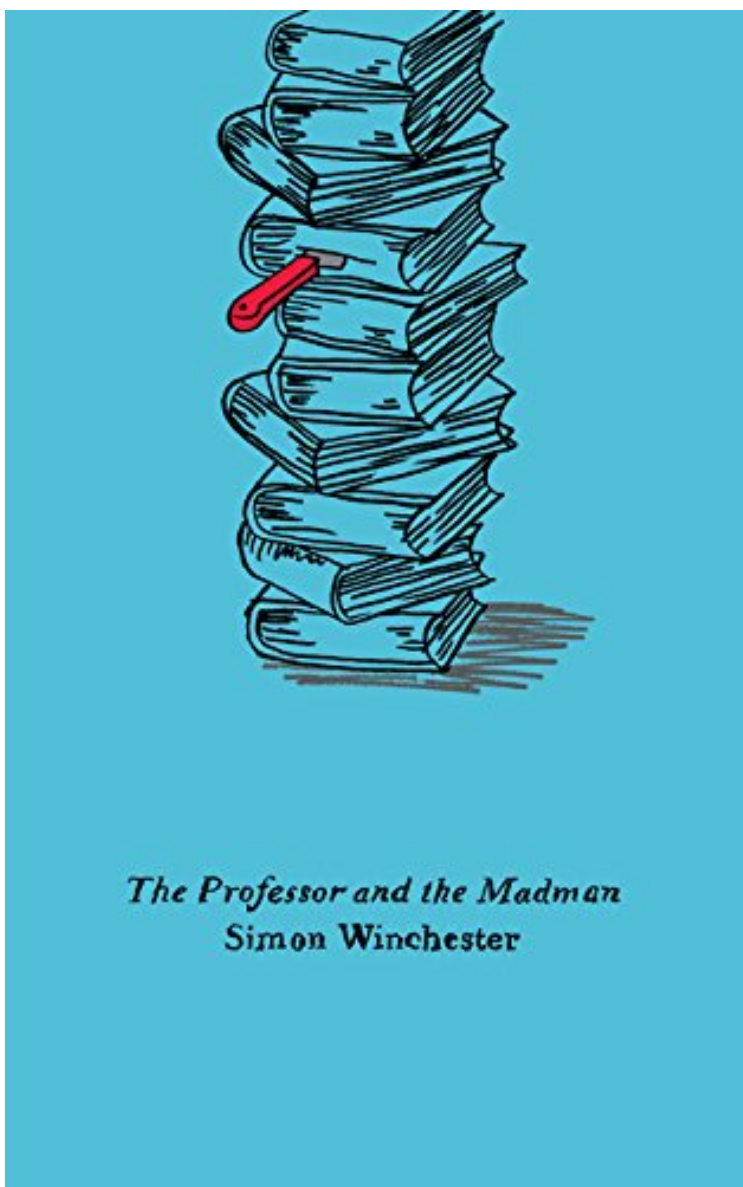


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## **The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary**

*Simon Winchester*

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**Simon Winchester : The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all

praised *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*:

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A Highly Readable Tale Well Told By James G. Bruen Jr. Winchester's a gifted story teller who writes elegantly. The Professor and the Madman complements the mechanical details of the decades-long construction of the Oxford English Dictionary and the etymology of words with a captivating and sorrowful tale of murder, lunacy, and genteel English manners, mannerisms, and eccentricities to create a highly readable tale. Winchester mixes legend, fact, speculation, inference, and insight in his account of Dr. William Minor, a Yale-educated American Civil War surgeon, who, tormented by mental illness, uses his service weapon to kill a hapless brewery worker in England. Remitted to an asylum for the criminally insane, Dr. Minor has a gentlemanly life by day and a tortured and tormented existence at night. He becomes an invaluable volunteer contributor to the OED, while those responsible for the OED are unaware of his confinement. With its twists, turns, and surprises, the book could have been a mystery novel. Parts of the book drag and seem padded, especially near the end. Though the book includes some charming illustrations, it would have benefited from inclusion of photos, particularly those Winchester describes in the text. Also, Winchester goes overboard with some speculations: If as an early teen Minor had masturbated or fornicated he "might have turned out very differently;" while in the asylum, did Minor have sex with the widow of the man he had killed? But all in all, a highly readable tale well told. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating Facet of History By J. Vilches The Professor and the Madman contains a small, fascinating facet of history. It explores the 70 year effort to create the Oxford English Dictionary, but focuses on the story of two men in particular. Dr. Murray, the first editor to make any significant progress on the OED, and Dr. Minor, a prolific contributor to the effort. The drama comes from the fact that Dr. Minor was a murderer and long-term inmate in a mental institution. The OED is not a dictionary like the one you will find on your shelf. Each letter has its own volume and each word entry has several supporting quotations to demonstrate the proper usage. Dr. Murray broadcast a wide plea for volunteers to supply appropriate quotations from literature. Dr. Minor provided a consistent stream of high quality contributions. The stories behind these two men humanize what could otherwise be a dry recital of facts and figures. The author delves into the tragic events that unfold in Dr. Minor's life as well as detailing the struggles of Dr. Murray to organize such an immense undertaking. There is enough history to satisfy history buffs, but also enough side stories to entertain the casual reader. The writing style is somewhat formal, but not so stilted as to be difficult to read. Simon Winchester now has another book out about the Oxford English Dictionary: *The Meaning of Everything*. If you are interested in a broader view of the history of the OED instead of focusing on the story of Dr. Murray and Minor, then that might be a better choice. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. We know a lot by simply reading the cover and ... By Spencer Reppe We know a lot by simply reading the cover and the jacket. This is nonfiction and it's about the writing of the Oxford English Dictionary, and there is also a murder, and some insanity. You'll have to read the book to find out the who, what, why, when and how. It's fair to reveal that you find out most of this within the first to pages. The balance of the book fleshes out the details in a way that kept my attention from beginning to end. The author paints an interesting picture of the British intellectual mind, the personalities that were involved with this gigantic endeavor, and also its significance today in a world that is increasingly paperless. Winchester has very thoughtfully and compassionately given us insights into modern thought on insanity, psychiatry, and treatment. The story could have been entirely different if we knew then what we know now maybe.

The national bestseller that chronicles the fascinating story of two extraordinary men and the making of the Oxford English Dictionary now available in a limited Olive Edition. The linguistic detective story of the decade. William Safire, New York Times Magazine Masterfully researched and eloquently written, *The Professor and the Madman* is an extraordinary tale of madness, genius, and the incredible obsessions of two remarkable men that led to the making of the Oxford English Dictionary and literary history. The compilation of the OED began in 1857, it was one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken. As definitions were collected, the overseeing committee, led by Professor James Murray, discovered that one man, Dr. W. C. Minor, had submitted more than ten thousand. When the committee insisted on honoring him, a shocking truth came to light: Dr. Minor, an American Civil War veteran, was also an inmate at an asylum for the criminally insane.

.com When the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary put out a call during the late 19th century pleading for "men of letters" to provide help with their mammoth undertaking, hundreds of responses came forth. Some helpers, like Dr. W.C. Minor, provided literally thousands of entries to the editors. But Minor, an American expatriate in England and a Civil War veteran, was actually a certified lunatic who turned in his dictionary entries from the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. Simon Winchester has produced a mesmerizing coda to the deeply troubled Minor's life, a life that in one sense began with the senseless murder of an innocent British brewery worker that the deluded Minor believed was an assassin sent by one of his numerous "enemies." Winchester also paints a rich portrait of the OED's leading light, Professor James Murray, who spent more than 40 years of his life on a project he would not see completed in his lifetime. Winchester traces the origins of the drive to create a "Big Dictionary" down through Murray and far back into

the past; the result is a fascinating compact history of the English language (albeit admittedly more interesting to linguistics enthusiasts than historians or true crime buffs). That Murray and Minor, whose lives took such wildly disparate turns yet were united in their fierce love of language, were able to view one another as peers and foster a warm friendship is just one of the delicately turned subplots of this compelling book. --Tjames Madison

From Publishers Weekly

The Oxford English Dictionary used 1,827,306 quotations to help define its 414,825 words. Tens of thousands of those used in the first edition came from the erudite, moneyed American Civil War veteran Dr. W.C. Minor—all from a cell at the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. Vanity Fair contributor Winchester (River at the Center of the World) has told his story in an imaginative if somewhat superficial work of historical journalism. Sketching Minor's childhood as a missionary's son and his travails as a young field surgeon, Winchester speculates on what may have triggered the prodigious paranoia that led Minor to seek respite in England in 1871 and, once there, to kill an innocent man. Pronounced insane and confined at Broadmoor with his collection of rare books, Minor happened upon a call for OED volunteers in the early 1880s. Here on more solid ground, Winchester enthusiastically chronicles Minor's subsequent correspondence with editor Dr. J.A.H. Murray, who, as Winchester shows, understood that Minor's endless scavenging for the first or best uses of words became his saving *raison d'être*, and looked out for the increasingly frail man's well-being. Winchester fills out the story with a well-researched mini-history of the OED, a wonderful demonstration of the lexicography of the word "art" and a sympathetic account of Victorian attitudes toward insanity. With his cheeky way with a tale ("It is a brave and foolhardy and desperate man who will perform an autopeotomy" he writes of Minor's self-mutilation), Winchester celebrates a gloomy life brightened by devotion to a quietly noble, nearly anonymous task. Photos not seen by PW. Agent, Peter Matson. BOMC selection. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From School Library Journal

YA—This unusual and exciting account centers on two men involved in the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary—Professor James Murray, its editor, and Dr. William Chester Minor, a true Connecticut Yankee who was one of the resource's most prolific contributors. The most surprising aspect of this long and productive partnership was that Dr. Minor, probably a schizophrenic, was incarcerated in England's most notorious insane asylum during the whole of their working relationship. He was a scholar and medical doctor whose fragile mental condition was probably exacerbated by duty as a surgeon during the American Civil War. His imprisonment was not harsh and his devotion to the cause of the dictionary and his precise and prolific contributions probably helped him hold on to some sense of reality. Winchester's descriptions of Civil War battlefields and the search for definitions of words such as *aardvark* or *elephant* are intriguing and compelling. This is a fine tale for both word lovers and history buffs. The momentum of the beginning scenes of warfare and murder are followed, not disappointingly, by descriptions of the trials and tribulations of dictionary crafting. Readers will meet some extraordinary men and an unusual woman, and find themselves well and truly ensconced in the late 19th century. Susan H. Woodcock, Kings Park Library, Burke, VA

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