

# Simon Winchester

1944-

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2003.  
Entry Updated : 11/06/2003

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### "Sidelights"

"I doubt that anybody has researched the British hereditary peerage as thoroughly or as entertainingly as Winchester," wrote Gerry Graber in a *Los Angeles Times* review of *Their Noble Lordships: Class and Power in Modern Britain*. In this book, the author explores the power and prestige of British peerage by way of fact and anecdote. Simon Winchester's basic contention is that Britain, by clinging to the legislative rights of heredity, limits her chances to adapt to the dynamic, modern world. Unlike Japan, who abandoned her system of peerage after World War II, Britain maintained her institution in which lawmakers are selected by birth right. Now if she is to "retain respect of the thrusting, grasping assertive countries of the globe that now surround her," Britain must, noted Winchester in *Their Noble Lordships*, "develop a machinery of government that is in tune with the demands of the century."

Winchester told a strange but true story in *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*. The professor behind the title is J. A. H. Murray, the determined editor who was behind the publication of the massive reference work, the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Volunteers helped to create the dictionary by submitting definitions and illustrative quotations. One of the most prolific contributors was a Dr. W. C. Minor, who supplied more than 10,000 entries. After seventeen years of corresponding with Minor, Murray decided to visit his star worker. He was shocked to discover that Minor was confined to Broadmoor Asylum, a British prison for the criminally insane.

Minor had been born in Ceylon to American missionary parents. He acted as a surgeon in the Civil War. Perhaps as a result of the horrors he saw during that conflict, Minor became paranoid and schizophrenic. He left America for Europe, looking for a rest cure. Probably under the influence of his delusions, he shot and killed an innocent man, believing him to be an assassin. Once confined to Broadmoor, Minor was treated well; he had two cells and was allowed to keep his precious library in one of them. He was lucid most of the time, yet at night he was still plagued by hallucinations and terrible self-loathing, which eventually drove him to mutilate himself. A *Library Journal* reviewer rated *The Professor and the Madman* as a "delightful, simply written book" that "tells how a murderer made a huge contribution to what became a major reference source in the Western world." A *Publishers Weekly* writer noted: "Winchester celebrates a gloomy life brightened by devotion to a quietly noble, nearly anonymous task."

Reviewing the British edition of the book, which was published as *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*, an *Economist* reviewer called it "an extraordinary tale, and Simon Winchester could not have told it better. His fast pace means that the lexicographical details are never dull. He has an engaging sympathy with this main characters, and even the minor ones are painted with swift, vivid strokes. . . . Mr Winchester has written a splendid book."

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Born September 28, 1944. Education: St. Catherine's College, Oxford, M.A., 1966. Religion: Church of England.  
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## CAREER

*Journal*, Newcastle upon Tyne, England, reporter, 1967-70; *Guardian*, London, England, correspondent in Northern Ireland, 1970-72, in Washington, DC, 1972-76, and in New Delhi, India, 1977-79; *Daily Mail*, London, chief U.S. correspondent in Washington DC, 1979-80; *Sunday Times*, London, senior feature writer, 1981--.

## WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- *In Holy Terror: Reporting the Ulster Troubles* (nonfiction), Faber (London), 1974, published as *Northern Ireland in Crisis: Reporting the Ulster Troubles*, Holmes & Meier, 1975.
- *American Heartbeat: Notes from a Midwestern Journey*, Faber (London), 1976.
- *Their Noble Lordships: The Hereditary Peerage Today*, Faber, 1981, published as *Their Noble Lordships: Class and Power in Modern Britain*, (nonfiction), Random House (New York, NY), 1982.
- (With Jan Morris) *Stones of Empire: The Buildings of the Raj* (nonfiction), Oxford University Press (New York, NY), 1983.
- *Prison Diary, Argentina*, Chatto & Windus (London), 1983.
- *The Sun Never Sets: Travels to the Remaining Outposts of the British Empire*, Prentice-Hall (Englewood Cliffs, NJ), 1985, published as *Outposts*, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1985.
- *Korea: A Walk through the Land of Miracles*, Prentice-Hall, 1988.
- *Pacific Rising: The Emergence of a New World Culture*, Prentice-Hall, 1991.
- *Hong Kong: Here Be Dragons*, Stewart, Tabori & Chang (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Pacific Nightmare: How Japan Starts World War III, A Future History*, Carol (New York, NY), 1992.
- (With Martin Parr) *Small World*, Dewi Lewis (Stockport, England), 1995.
- *The River at the Center of the World: A Journey up the Yangtze and Back in Chinese Time*, Holt (New York City), 1996.
- *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1998, published in England as *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*, Viking, 1998.
- *The Fracture Zone: A Return to the Balkans*, HarperCollins, 1999.
- *The Map That Changed The World*, HarperCollins, 2001.
- *Krakatoa: The Day the World Exploded, August 27, 1883*, HarperCollins, 2003.
- *The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

Contributing editor of *Harper's*.

## WORKS IN PROGRESS

*The Treasures of India*, for Time-Life; *A History of Rioting in Britain*, a film for British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC), with a book

# History of the Dictionary

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## How it began

1857: The Philological Society of London calls for a new English Dictionary

## More work than they thought

1884: Five years into a proposed ten-year project, the editors reach *ant*

## One step at a time

1884-1928: The Dictionary is published in fascicles

## Keeping it current

1933-1986: Supplements to the *OED*

## Making it modern

1980s: The Supplements are integrated with the *OED* to produce its Second Edition

## Into the electronic age

1992: The first CD-ROM version of the *OED* is published

## The future has begun

The present: The *OED* is now being fully revised, with new material published in parts online

The *Oxford English Dictionary* has been the last word on words for over a century. But, as with a respected professor or admired parent, we count on its wisdom and authority without thinking much about how it was acquired. What is the history of the *Oxford English Dictionary*? Exploring its origins and development will give new insight into this extraordinary, living document.

## How it began

When the members of the Philological Society of London decided, in 1857, that existing English language dictionaries were incomplete and deficient, and called for a complete re-examination of the language from Anglo-Saxon times onward, they knew they were embarking on an ambitious project. However, even they didn't realize the full extent of the work they initiated, or how long it would take to achieve the final result.

The project proceeded slowly after the Society's first grand statement of purpose. Eventually, in 1879, the Society made an agreement with the Oxford University Press and James A. H. Murray to begin work on a *New English Dictionary* (as the *Oxford English Dictionary* was then known).

## More work than they thought

*Existing English dictionaries were incomplete and deficient*

The new dictionary was planned as a four-volume, 6,400-page work that would include all English language vocabulary from the Early Middle English period (1150 AD) onward, plus some earlier words if they had continued to be used into Middle English.

It was estimated that the project would be finished in approximately ten years. Five years down

the road, when Murray and his colleagues had only reached as far as the word 'ant', they realized it was time to reconsider their schedule. It was not surprising that the project was taking longer than anticipated. Not only are the complexities of the English language formidable, but it also never stops evolving. Murray and his Dictionary colleagues had to keep track of new words and new meanings of existing words at the same time that they were trying to examine the previous seven centuries of the language's development.

Murray and his team did manage to publish the first part (or 'fascicle', to use the technical term) in 1884, but it was clear by this point that a much more comprehensive work was required than had been imagined by the Philological Society almost thirty years earlier.

*The English language never stops evolving*

## One step at a time

Over the next four decades work on the Dictionary continued and new editors joined the project. Murray now had a large team directed by himself, Henry Bradley, W.A. Craigie, and C.T. Onions. These men worked steadily, producing fascicle after fascicle until finally, in April, 1928, the last volume was published. Instead of 6,400 pages in four volumes, the Dictionary published under the imposing name *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* - contained over 400,000 words and phrases in ten volumes. Sadly, Murray did not live to see the completion of his great work; he died in 1915. The work to which he had devoted his life represented an achievement unprecedented in the history of publishing anywhere in the world. The Dictionary had taken its place as the ultimate authority on the language.

## Keeping it current

An exhilarating aspect of a living language is that it continually changes. This means that no dictionary is ever really finished. After fifty years of work on the first edition, the editors must have found this fact exhausting to contemplate. Nevertheless, as soon as the original ten volumes of the *New English Dictionary* were completed, Craigie and Onions, the two editors still involved with the project, began updating it.

Nevertheless, as soon as the original ten volumes of the *New English Dictionary* were completed, Craigie and Onions, the two editors still involved with the project, began updating it. In 1933, a single-volume *Supplement* to the Dictionary was published. Also at this time the original Dictionary was reprinted in twelve volumes and the work was formally given its current title, the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

*Modern English was continuously monitored by the celebrated 'reading programme'*

The twelve-volume *Oxford English Dictionary* and the single-volume *Supplement* represented the final statement from Oxford for many years to come. However, in 1957, Robert Burchfield was appointed Editor for a new *Supplement* that would replace the 1933 volume and include much new information on the language (especially on twentieth century vocabulary) obtained in the intervening years. Modern English was continuously monitored by the Dictionary's celebrated 'reading programme', more scientific and technical terms were added, and the scope of the Dictionary was broadened to include considerably more words from North America, Australia,

New Zealand, South Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean. Substantially longer than the 1933 edition, this new *Supplement* was published in four volumes between 1972 and 1986.

## Making it modern

In 1982, as Burchfield's work on the *Supplement* came within sight of the completion, Oxford University Press debated how to bring this monumental dictionary into the modern age. It soon became clear that the traditional methods of compiling entries would have to be updated, and that the source material should be transferred from paper to an electronic medium. The enterprise must change to deploy project managers and systems engineers as well as lexicographers. The Press duly set about this with the formation of the New Oxford English Dictionary Project in 1984. The team was given the objective of publishing an integrated print edition in 1989 and also of providing a full, electronic text to form the basis of future revision and extension of the Dictionary.

How do you take a multi-volume, century-old, print-based reference work and turn it into a machine-readable resource? By spending \$13.5 million over five years in the most adventurous computerization project seen in the publishing industry at that time. Bespoke computer systems were built for both pre-processing the text and editing it in electronic form; text was marked up in the (then) novel SGML encoding scheme; the pages of the old edition and the *Supplement* were typed again by 120 keyboarders; and more than 50 proofreaders checked the results of their work.

*The most adventurous computerization project seen in the publishing industry*

In Oxford John Simpson and Edmund Weiner with a core group of lexicographers reviewed, corrected, and edited this new electronic dictionary, as well as adding 5,000 new words and senses to 400,000 definitions previously expressed in 60,000,000 words. In all, the Project team succeeded in accomplishing around 85 per cent of its work by software, but the remaining 15 per cent required the critical eye of the editors. The culmination of this mammoth task was the setting in type and subsequent printing of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition. In 1989 this was published on time, to great acclaim. The finished work, edited by Simpson and Weiner, fills 22,000 pages which are bound in twenty substantial volumes.

## Into the electronic age

In 1992 the *Oxford English Dictionary* again made history when a CD-ROM edition of the work was published. Suddenly a massive, twenty-volume work that takes up four feet of shelf space and weighs 150 pounds is reduced to a slim, shiny disk that takes up virtually no space and weighs just a few ounces.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* on CD-ROM has been a great success. The electronic format has revolutionized the way people use the Dictionary to search and retrieve information. Complex investigations into word origins or quotations that would have been impossible to conduct using the print edition now take only a few seconds. Because the electronic format makes the *Oxford English Dictionary* so easy to use, its audience now embraces all kinds of interested readers beyond the confines of the scholarly community.

## The future has begun

Today, once again, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is under alteration. Continuing the technological innovations, the Dictionary is now available as an online publication designed to take full advantage of this powerful and accessible medium.

The content of the Dictionary is also being comprehensively revised. However, instead of adding new material in supplements to the main edition, or simply interspersing new information throughout the body of the old edition, the entire work is being updated. This is the first time material written by Murray and the early editors has been changed since they finished in 1928. The result of this ambitious undertaking will be a completely revitalized *Oxford English Dictionary*.

At no period in its history has the *Oxford English Dictionary* been profitable commercially for Oxford University Press. However, the Press remains committed to sustaining research into the origins and development of the English language wherever it is spoken. This commitment to the cultural values embodied in the Dictionary is shown by the £34 million (US\$55 million) funding of the current revision programme and the associated programme for new words. The remedial work of revising original 19th and early 20th century editorial material is in progress, and the results of the revision programme and additions of new words will be published online every three months.

The ambitious goals which the Philological Society set out in 1857 seem modest in comparison with the phenomenal achievement which their initiative set in motion. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is a living document that has been growing and changing for 140 years. Far more than a convenient place to look up words and their origins, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is an irreplaceable part of English culture. It not only provides an important record of the evolution of our language, but also documents the continuing development of our society. It is certain to continue in this role as we enter the new century.

## Teacher's notes

## The Surgeon of Crowthorne

by Simon Winchester



## SUMMARY

**T**he *Surgeon of Crowthorne* by Simon Winchester is the fascinating true story of two men who worked on the Oxford English Dictionary. Dr James Murray was the editor of the dictionary. Dr William Minor was a madman and a convicted murderer. From his room in Broadmoor, the asylum for the criminally insane, he sent in thousands of contributions to the dictionary and his working partnership and friendship with Murray lasted nearly twenty years.

The book begins with the story of the first meeting of Murray and Minor, an event which has been romanticised into a fictional account which has Murray arriving at Broadmoor asylum unaware that the man he is visiting is a patient there and mistaking the governor for Dr Minor. (The truth is that whilst Murray did originally think that Dr Minor was a member of staff at the asylum rather than an inmate, he had been told Minor's story by a visiting American librarian before he first went to Broadmoor to meet him.)

Minor had been committed to Broadmoor after he had murdered George Merrett, a brewery worker in Lambeth Marsh, London. Minor, an American, had come to Britain the previous autumn because he was ill. Born in Ceylon of religious parents, he had studied medicine at Yale University in the USA. He then joined the army as a surgeon, serving during the American Civil War. It is suggested that it was Minor's experiences during the American Civil War that started the decline in his mental health. After leaving the army, Minor's madness gradually got worse and a paranoid fear of Irishmen resulted in his shooting of George Merrett, believing him to be an Irishman who was persecuting him.

James Murray was born in Scotland, also of religious parents. The family was poor and could not afford to send him to school after the age of fourteen. Nevertheless, Murray had an insatiable hunger for knowledge and taught himself from books. By the age of fifteen he knew several languages, including Latin and Greek. He also taught himself geography, geology, botany, astronomy and history, his particular favourite. He joined the Philology Society and by 1869 was one of the people in charge. He met other great language scholars including Frederick Furnivall who was the second editor of the Oxford English Dictionary. Subsequently Murray became the new editor. He sent out a letter asking for new readers to find words and quotations. One of these found its way to Dr Minor in Broadmoor and he became one of the contributors to the dictionary.

The *Surgeon of Crowthorne* is also the story of the Oxford English Dictionary. Minor was one of Murray's most useful and conscientious contributors and his unique way of working saved much time and effort. Minor

remained insane and was convinced that people were coming into his room at night and abusing him. Apart from these delusions, which got worse as he got older, there was nothing wrong with his mind. He was well-educated and well-read and the humane regime at Broadmoor under Dr Nicholson allowed him access to all the books he needed for his work.

Eventually, he became too disturbed to continue working on the dictionary. Murray and his wife tried to have him sent back to his family in America, away from the new governor of Broadmoor, Dr Brayn, who had instituted a harsh regime in the asylum, removed all of Minor's comforts and seemed deliberately to treat him in a cruel way. Eventually their efforts were successful and Minor, escorted by his brother Alfred, was taken to a hospital in Washington and eventually to one in New England where he lived until his death at the age of 86. Murray himself had died five years earlier.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Winchester is a well-known British writer, journalist and broadcaster who has worked as a foreign correspondent for most of his career. He has won several awards as a journalist, including Britain's Journalist of the Year. He regularly contributes to the BBC radio programme 'From our own correspondent'.

Born in England, Simon Winchester has also lived in Africa, India and Asia. Whilst reporting on the Falklands conflict, he was arrested on spying charges and imprisoned for three months in Tierra del Fuego. His book *Prison Diary, Argentina* is based on this experience. He has also written *The River at the Centre of the World - A Journey Up the Yangtze and Back in Chinese Time*. He now lives in New York where he makes his living mainly as a freelance writer.

## BACKGROUND AND THEMES

*The Surgeon of Crowthorne* is both the story of two great men and the story of a great book. Chapters 5 and 6 give a useful account of the history of dictionaries, the changing views as to what they should contain and the development and importance of the Oxford English Dictionary. They also give some idea of the vastness of the undertaking and the scholarship, attention to detail, sheer effort and the procedure involved that went into its production. When Murray started work in 1897, he predicted that it would take ten years to finish the entire work. However, he was still working on the letter T when he died and the whole book was not finally completed until 1927 - even then several supplementary volumes were needed as more words were found.

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## Teacher's notes

The story of the production of the great Oxford English Dictionary is the backdrop in the book to the story of two remarkable men, James Murray and William Minor. Both were scholarly men, though Murray was largely self-taught and both were from religious backgrounds. Both were natural linguists and spoke several languages. For both the production of the dictionary was a life-long passion.

Minor's story is extraordinarily sad. Whether it was his experiences in the American Civil War that caused the onset of madness or whether it was something he was bound to develop anyway, it is certain that his insanity blighted what would otherwise have been a promising and fulfilling life. Amongst the books that he read for Murray were many on travel, indicating that this is something he would greatly have enjoyed. One fascinating insight offered by *The Surgeon of Crowthorne* is into the treatment of the mentally ill at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. It may seem surprising to the modern reader, accustomed to the idea that it is only in recent years that our judicial system has acquired any traces of humanity, that Minor was so well-treated after his murder of George Merrett. It is interesting that conditions in the asylum got markedly worse as it entered the twentieth century rather than better.

## Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopyable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers, but with the exception of pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

### ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Put students in groups and ask them to look at the photograph on the cover of the book and discuss these questions.

- What kind of person do you think this man is? Make a list of adjectives to describe him.
- Do you think he is an educated man? What do you think he does for a living?
- What can you say about his clothes?
- Do you think he is the sort of man you would like to meet?

When students have finished, tell them that this book is about two men, one the editor of a dictionary and the other a madman and murderer. Ask them which one they think the photograph shows.

### ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

#### Chapters 1-2

- In groups, students act out the murder of George Merrett.
- In pairs, students write a script for the true first meeting of James Murray and William Minor and act it out.

#### Chapters 3-5

- In pairs, students make a list of the similarities and differences in the early lives of Murray and Minor.
- In groups, students make a list of the similarities and differences between the dictionaries produced by Robert Cawdrey, Nathaniel Bailey and Samuel Johnson.

#### Chapters 6-8

- Students write either Murray's letter asking for new readers to find words and quotations for the Oxford English Dictionary or Minor's reply offering to be a reader.
- In pairs, students act out Eliza Merrett's first visit to Minor in Broadmoor.

#### Chapters 9-11

- In small groups, students discuss how Minor's method of working for Murray differed from that of other readers.
- In pairs, students discuss how Minor's circumstances changed when Dr Nicholson was replaced by Dr Brayn at Broadmoor.

#### Chapters 12-13

Students write a description of either James Murray or William Minor from the point of view of the other man.

### ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

- In pairs, students write the newspaper article that appeared under the title **AMERICAN MURDERER HELPED WRITE OXFORD DICTIONARY**.
- In small groups, students discuss the following questions:
  - Why do you think Simon Winchester dedicated his book to 'George Merrett of Lambeth'?
  - What similarities and differences can you find between Dr Murray and Dr Minor?

## Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

#### Chapters 1-2

asylum (n) a hospital for people with mental illnesses  
brewery (n) a place where beer is made  
coach (n) a closed vehicle with four wheels pulled by horses  
correspond (v) if two people correspond, they write letters to each other  
cottage (n) a small house, especially in the country  
edit (v) to prepare a book by deciding what to include in it and correcting mistakes  
prostitute (n) someone who has sex to earn money  
protagonist (n) the main character in a play, film or story  
quote (v) to repeat exactly what someone else has said or written  
sane (adj) able to think in a normal and reasonable way  
surgeon (n) a doctor who does operations in a hospital

#### Chapters 3-5

brand (v) to burn a mark into an animal's skin (usually to show who it belongs to)  
brigade (n) a large unit of soldiers, forming part of an army  
civil war (n) a war between groups of people from the same country  
desert (v) to leave the army without permission  
edition (n) the copies of a book, newspaper, etc. that are all the same  
entry (n) a short piece of writing in a book, a list, etc.  
fort (n) a strong building used by soldiers for defending a place  
lecture (n) a talk to a group of people about a subject  
missionary (n) someone who goes to a foreign country in order to teach people about Christianity  
monolingual (adj) speaking or using only one language  
penicillin (n) a substance used as a medicine to destroy bacteria  
publish (v) if a book, magazine, etc. is published, it is printed and made available for people to buy  
scholar (n) someone who studies a subject and knows a lot about it  
slip (n) a small piece of paper

#### Chapters 6-8

block (n) a large building with many rooms, homes, offices, etc. in it  
supplement (n) something that you add to something else to improve it

#### Chapters 12-13

masturbate (v) to rub your sexual organs in order to get sexual pleasure  
penis (n) the male sex organ

Published and distributed by Pearson Education  
Factsheet written by Helena Gomm  
Factsheet series developed by Louise James





## Student's activities

### The Surgeon of Crowthorne



#### Photocopiable

Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group only exercises are marked.

#### Activities before reading the book

Read the Introduction, then say if the following sentences are true or false. If the sentences are false, correct them.

- Dr William Minor was the governor of Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane.
- Dr James Murray was the editor of a dictionary.
- Dr Murray and Dr Minor were both British.
- Dr Minor murdered someone.
- Dr Murray fought in the American Civil War.
- Dr Murray was insane.

#### Activities while reading the book

##### Chapters 1-2

- Why do you think Simon Winchester includes the false story of the first meeting of Murray and Minor as well as the true one?
- Put the following events in the order in which they happened.
  - Burton and Ward took George Merrett to hospital.
  - Henry Tarrant heard shots.
  - Elizabeth Merrett saw her husband George walking to work.
  - Minor fired the shot that killed George Merrett.
  - Henry Tarrant arrested William Minor.
  - George Merrett agreed to exchange work times with another worker.
  - Minor started to chase George Merrett.
  - A neighbour knocked on the Merretts' window.
  - The first of Minor's shots hit the brewery wall.
  - The police tried to find out why Minor had killed George Merrett.
  - George Merrett got dressed for work.
  - Minor shouted at George Merrett.
- Find these numbers in Chapter 2 and say what each of them is.
  - 24
  - 6
  - 41
  - 1872
  - 742

##### Chapters 3-5

- The following sentences are false. Correct them and say what you know about each situation.
  - James Murray left school at fourteen because he wasn't very clever.
  - Murray taught the cows in the fields near his house to speak Latin.
  - Murray married for a second time because his first wife left him.
  - William Minor was younger than James Murray.
  - Minor served in the American Civil War as a soldier.
  - Minor's mental problems were partly caused by his relationships with men.
  - Minor had to brand an Irish soldier who had stolen something from the army.
  - Nathaniel Bailey's dictionary was unusual because it contained only difficult words.
  - Few people thought that Johnson's dictionary was any good.
- Choose the correct answer.
  - Why did Murray leave Scotland?
    - He couldn't get a job in a bank there.
    - His wife was ill and needed somewhere warmer.
    - He wanted to work in the British Museum in London.
  - Why did Minor's parents send him to America?
    - They couldn't afford to keep him in Ceylon any longer.
    - They wanted him to marry an English girl on the boat.
    - They had noticed the way he watched the girls on the beach.
  - Why did the army send Minor to Fort Barrancas in Florida?
    - They didn't like the fact that he spent his nights with prostitutes.
    - There were a lot of sick people in Florida who needed a doctor.
    - They thought the weather in Florida would be good for his health.

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## Student's activities

- 3 Some of the early English dictionary writers tried to 'fix' the language. Answer these questions.
- Do you think language can ever be 'fixed'?
  - In what ways do languages change and why do they do this?
  - Is it a good idea to try to prevent foreign words from entering a language?

## Chapters 6-8

- 1 Match the names of these people to the sentences.

Chenevix Trench	William Orange	Frederick Furnivall
Eliza Merrett	Herbert Coleridge	

- This person visited Minor in Broadmoor and brought him books.
- This person was the first editor of the Oxford English Dictionary.
- This person was the governor of Broadmoor when Minor first went there.
- This person first proposed the idea of a dictionary should contain all the words in the language.
- This person was the editor of the Oxford English Dictionary before Murray.

## 2 Answer these questions.

- How did Minor hear of Murray's need for readers?
- Why is it surprising that Eliza Merrett visited Minor?
- Why was working on the dictionary good for Minor's mental health?

## Chapters 9-11

- Imagine that Murray comes home after his first visit to Minor and tells his wife Ada about it. With another student, act out their conversation.
- Make a list of the ways in which Dr Nicholson helped Minor and showed that he liked him.
- How did life for Minor change when Dr Nicholson was replaced by Dr Brayn?

## Chapters 12-13

- 1 Answer these questions.

- Why did Minor's belief in God lead to tragedy?
  - Why does the author say that 'history will probably not judge Dr Brayn kindly for his treatment of William Chester Minor'?
  - What is the likely reason for Winston Churchill's sympathy for Minor?
  - What evidence is there that the end of Minor's life was a little happier than his last few years in Broadmoor?
- 2 Chapter 13 is called 'The End of Great Men'. In what ways were Murray and Minor great?

## Activities after reading the book

- Imagine that you are making a film of *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*. Decide where you will film it and which actors you will use. Are there any parts of the story you want to leave out? Are there any parts that would be difficult to film?
- The Surgeon of Crowthorne* is both the story of two men and the story of a book. Which story do you find most interesting? Do you think the book would be as good if any part were left out?
- With a partner pick out three words and write your own definition suitable for a dictionary. Then read it out for your partner to guess which word you are defining. You could choose words from the activities in the back of the Reader.



**Amazon.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 --This text refers to the *Hardcover* edition.

**Amazon.com Audiobook Review**

The compilation of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 70 years in the making, was an intellectually heroic feat with a twist worthy of the greatest mystery fiction: one of its most valuable contributors was a criminally insane American physician, locked up in an English asylum for murder. British stage actor Simon Jones leads us through this uncommon meeting of minds (the other belonging to self-educated dictionary editor James Murray) at full gallop. Ultimately, it's hard to say which is more remarkable: the facts of this amazingly well-researched story, or the sound of author Simon Winchester's erudite prose. Jones's reading smoothly transports listeners to the 19th century, reminding us why so many brilliant people obsessively set out to catalogue the English language. This unabridged version contains an interview between Winchester and John Simpson, editor of the Oxford dictionary. (Running time: 6.5 hours, 6 cassettes) --Lou Schuler --This text refers to the *Audio Cassette* edition.

**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.

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***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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***From Library Journal***

The Oxford English Dictionary still stands as the distinctive and definitive history of the English Language. First suggested in 1857, this work proposed to present the history of every word by quoting the passage from literature where each was first used. Nearly 22 years later, the stalled project finally got moving with the selection of Dr. James Murray as editor. Handbills were distributed requesting volunteer readers to locate quotations and begin assembling word lists. One such flyer found its way to the Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane in Crowthorne, Berkshire, where Dr. William C. Minor, who was committed in 1872 for murder, occupied two large cells. Minor would prove to be one of the most prolific contributors to the OED, submitting over 10,000 quotations. For nearly 20 years, Murray and Minor corresponded regularly regarding the finer points of their lexicographical endeavors. With the book nearly half completed, Murray felt it was important to personally meet and thank him. Winchester does a superb job of weaving the historical facts of murder, madness, and scholarly pursuit into a fitting tribute to the remarkable OED. As the reader of his own work, his voice perfectly evokes Victorian England. Highly recommended for all libraries.

*-Gloria Maxwell, Penn Valley Community Coll., Kansas City, MO*

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***David Walton, New York Times Book Review***

"elegant and scrupulous" --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

***-- The Economist***

"An extraordinary tale, and Simon Winchester could not have told it better. . . . [He] has written a splendid book."

***Daniel Mark Epstein, Wall Street Journal***

"Mr. Winchester deftly weaves...a narrative full of suspense, pathos and humor.... In this elegant book

the writer has created a vivid parable, in the spirit of Nabokov and Borges. There is much truth to be drawn from it, about Victorian pride, the relation between language and the world, and the fine line between sanity and madness." --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

**--Mark Rozzo, *Washington Post Book World***

"Winchester's history of the OED is brisk and entertaining"

***The Boston Globe*, Robert Taylor**

...[a] fascinating tale ... [and] a compelling slice of social and intellectual history... --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

***From AudioFile***

This is a fascinating true story well told about a murderous nutcase who contributed important entries to the original and monumental OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY\*. The author has a listener-friendly voice, even though he seems to be fighting off a bug in his throat. He reads as if late for an appointment. Nonetheless, he gives us a satisfying listen. Y.R. (c) AudioFile, Portland, Maine --*This text refers to the Audio Cassette edition.*

***From Booklist***

Distinguished journalist Winchester tells a marvelous, true story that few readers will have heard about. His narrative is based on official government files locked away for more than a century. As everyone knows, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is an essential library reference tool. The 12-volume *OED* took more than 70 years to produce, and one of its most distinguishing features is the copious quotations from published works to illustrate every shade of word usage. By the late 1890s the huge project was nearly half done, and the editor at the time, Professor James Murray, felt the need to meet and personally thank Dr. William Minor, with whom he had been in lengthy contact and who had contributed a lion's share of the quotations. As it turned out, Dr. Minor was an American surgeon who many years before had been found not guilty of murder by reason of insanity but had been incarcerated in an English asylum ever since. The tale of their affiliation and friendship reads like a creatively conceived novel. *Brad Hooper* --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

***From Kirkus Reviews***

Remarkably readable, this chronicle of lexicography roams from the great dictionary itself to hidden nooks in the human psyche that sometimes house the motives for murder, the sources for sanity, and the blueprint for creativity. Manchester Guardian journalist Winchester (*The River at the Center of the World*, 1996; *Pacific Rising*, 1991) turns from Asia toward that most British of topics: the Oxford English Dictionary. His account is studded with odd persons and unexpected drama. To wit: When O.E.D. editor Professor James Murray headed off to meet a major contributor (of more than 10,000 entries) to his epochal reference work, he discovered that this distinguished philologist, Dr. William Chester Minor, was incarcerated for life in an asylum for the criminally insane. Minor, apparently a paranoiac killer, had committed murder in 1872; to his lasting travail, he witnessed atrocities in the American Civil War. Latterly ailing (and sexually repressed), he clung to his lexicographic efforts for dear life and the sake of his sanity or what remained of it. All those Dictionary slips, opines Winchester, were [Minors] medication, [and] became his therapy. When he describes the original O.E.D.'s "twelve tombstone-sized volumes," we get a whiff of the grueling mental task exacted from its servants by the work, reminiscent of the labors involved in Melville's classic "Bartleby the Scrivener" in a book that is

similarly a psychological masterwork. In praising the achievement of the work, Winchester rejoices, "It wears its status with a magisterial self-assurance, not least by giving its half million definitions a robustly Victorian certitude of tone." Winchester's own tone and his prose are wonderfully Victorian, an apt mirror for his subject. The author begins each chapter with an entry from the original O.E.D. as an appropriate heading, such as "murder," "lunatic," "polymath" ("a person of much or varied learning") and, eventually, "acknowledgment." First-rate writing: well-crafted, incisive, abundantly playful. (b&w photos, not seen) (Book-of-the-Month Club selection) -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

**--David Walton, New York Times Book Review**

"elegant and scrupulous"

**-- Richard Bernstein, New York Times**

"a fascinating, spicy, learned tale"

**William Safire, New York Times Magazine**

"*The Professor and the Madman*...is the linguistic detective story of the decade.... Winchester does a superb job of historical research that should entice readers even more interested in deeds than words." --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

**Mark Rozzo, Washington Post Book World**

"Winchester's history of the OED is brisk and entertaining" --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

**Bob Minzesheimer, USA Today**

"It's a story for readers who know the joy of words and can appreciate side trips through the history of dictionaries and marvel at the idea that when Shakespeare wrote, there were no dictionaries to consult.... Winchester, a British Journalist who's written 12 other books, combines a reporter's eye for detail with a historian's sense of scale. His writing is droll and eloquent" --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

**Will Self, The Times (London)**

"This is almost my favorite kind of book: the work of social and intellectual history which through the oblique treatment of major developments manages to throw unusual light on humankind and its doings. . . . Simon Winchester's effortlessly clear, spare prose is the perfect vehicle for the tale . . . absolutely riveting." --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

**John Banville, Literary Review**

"Madness, violence, arcane obsessions, weird learning, ghastly comedy, all set out in an atmosphere of po-faced, high neo-Gothic. The geographical span is wide, from Dickensian London to Florida's Pensacola Bay, from the beaches at Trincomalee to the Civil War battlefields of the United States. . . . It

is a wonderful story." --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

### **Charles Taylor, Salon**

"Simon Winchester, in his splendid, oddball slice of history *The Professor and the Madman*, has come up with an irresistible hook... [an] utterly fascinating account of how a combination of scholarship and nationalism begat what would become the *Oxford English Dictionary*... If the initial sections of [Winchester's] tale have the appeal of a gaslight Victorian thriller, Winchester doesn't leave it at that. He's a superb historian because he's a superb storyteller.... The strange richness of it all is enhanced by the flawless clarity of Winchester's prose. Winchester, investigating an odd bit of background trivia about the making of one of the world's great books, has the courage of his own curiosity. The elegant curio he has created is as enthralling as a good story can be and as informative as any history aspires to be." --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

### **Kirkus Reviews (starred)**

"Remarkably readable, this chronicle of lexicography roams from the great dictionary itself to hidden nooks in the human psyche that sometimes house the motives for murder, the sources for sanity, and the blueprint for creativity." --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

### **Oliver Sacks, M.D.**

"I found *The Professor and the Madman* both enthralling and moving, in its brilliant reconstruction of a most improbable event: the major contributions made to the great Oxford English Dictionary by a deeply delusional, incarcerated "madman", and the development of a true friendship between him and the editor of the OED. One sees here the redemptive potential of work and love in even the most deeply, "hopelessly," psychotic." --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

### **Ingram**

The riveting true story of Dr. W.C. Minor--the ingenious but insane American Civil War veteran who contributed more than 10,000 definitions to the Oxford English Dictionary. --*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

### **About the Author**

Simon Winchester is the author of *The Map That Changed the World*, *The Professor and the Madman*, and *The Fracture Zone*, among many other titles. He lives in Massachusetts and in the Western Isles of Scotland.

### **Book Description**

*The Professor and the Madman*, masterfully researched and eloquently written, 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*, begun in 1857, 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.



truth behind the legend  
of the  
meeting

No doubt you'll recall from my first article on the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*Bikwil* Nos. 8 and 9, 1998 July and September) that an indispensable feature of the Dictionary's genesis was the carefully crafted invitation by James Murray to readers worldwide to submit annotated citations of word usage.

As we know, the response was gratifyingly unstinting. The most prolific contributor to the First Edition was one Thomas Austin who transmitted no fewer than 165,000 quotations. The record so far for the most quotations submitted to the *OED* by one person, however, is held by Marghanita Laski, a.k.a. Sarah Russell, (1915-88), the well known British broadcaster, journalist and author, who managed to extract a quarter of a million quotations for the Reading Programmes of the *Supplement* and the Second Edition.

Tucked away in Murray's alphabetical acknowledgment list of the volunteers in the preface to the first completed volume is the entry "Dr. W.C. Minor of Crowthorne", and the enthralling tale that lies behind that innocuous single line of print is the centre of my column today. I do not intend retelling that story in all its beguiling detail for you, however. Let me instead just mention enough particulars to whet your appetite for reading it in full in the recent biography of Dr. Minor by Simon Winchester. (Note: Most of the quotes herein come from the biography itself, some from Winchester's summary in the July 1998 issue of *Oxford English Dictionary News*, and others from various press reviews or interviews with Winchester.

To start with, I have to put you in the picture regarding a long-standing myth that Winchester refutes. This fabrication was about how, some years after Dr. Minor began contributing to the Dictionary, James Murray became aware of his strange situation.

As temptingly depicted by American journalist Hayden Church in the *Strand Magazine* in 1915, the original story went that Murray had become increasingly impressed with the work of his industrious contributor W.C. Minor, and invited him, together with other associates and contributors, to a celebratory Dictionary Dinner at Oxford in October 1897.

Minor declined the invitation pleading illness, but invited Murray to visit him at Crowthorne, in rural Berkshire.

Puzzled and maybe even a little exasperated, Murray is supposed eventually to have accepted the invitation. He is met at the railway station by coachman, carriage and horses. Upon arrival at their destination, a large country mansion, he is ushered into a book-lined study, where he makes a short speech of self-introduction to the important looking man he finds there.

Let's see how Winchester depicts the mythical dialogue:

"It is indeed an honour and a pleasure to at long last to make your acquaintance — for you must be, kind sir, my most assiduous helpmeet, Dr. W.C. Minor?" . . .

"I regret, kind sir, that I am not. It is not at all as you suppose. My name is Nicholson. I am in fact the Governor of the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum, and the Dr. Minor whom you seek is here because he is a murderer, and a madman. He is an American, and the longest-staying of all the asylum patients."

Church's article was quickly and strongly condemned by Henry Bradley (who'd recently been appointed Murray's successor as *OED* chief editor), in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in which he rebuked Church for "several misstatements of fact":

The story of Dr. Murray's first interview with Dr. Minor is, so far as its most romantic features are concerned, a fiction.

Despite this, the version was perpetuated for over eighty years. After all, it was too good to ignore: "scholarship in a padded cell", as the oh-so-sophisticated journalism of the *Pall Mall Gazette* put it. Indeed, the myth was even accepted in both K.M. Elisabeth Murray's 1977 biography of her grandfather, *Caught in the Web of Words*, and Jonathon Green's 1996 history of lexicography, *Chasing the Sun*.

Only one person in England, Elizabeth Knowles, an OUP editor, seems ever seriously to have looked into the story. During the 1990s she took pains to seek out a definitive account of the Murray-Minor first meeting. Her findings were published in the academic quarterly journal *Dictionaries*.

So what was the truth? First, some background.

William Chester Minor (1834-1920), was born in Sri Lanka of American parents and after graduation from Yale Medical School in 1863 joined the Union Army at the height of the Civil War as a surgeon, a commission that would unnerve him badly. By 1868 there were signs that his mind was going, and having had some treatment in a Washington asylum he was retired from the Army "incapacitated by causes arising in the line of duty". In 1872, while on a trip to London (partly to visit John Ruskin) he shot and killed an innocent man, George Merrett, in the delusional belief that his victim was there to persecute him.

He was arrested, tried, found to be mad and sentenced to imprisonment (as "Patient 742") in Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane at Crowthorne, Berkshire, never to be released.

Now, homicide among liberal arts practitioners isn't confined to lexicography, you know. Take painting, for instance, and the case of artist Richard Dadd (1819-87). Once a promising young painter with



formal training, in 1843 Dadd suffered a mental breakdown and killed his father by cutting his throat with a razor. Thereafter he was condemned to spend his life in English mental asylums, first for 20 years in Bedlam, then in Broadmoor. His imprisonment in Broadmoor overlapped part of that of Dr. Minor, for whom Dadd represented the one and only intellectual peer he would know in his 38 years there. (Minor painted too — he was a water-colourist). Richard Dadd is best remembered for the many meticulous fairy paintings he created while incarcerated.

Being an educated and wealthy man, Minor was allowed a pair of private rooms in Broadmoor, to keep and add to his library of books and to paint his pictures. Soon he had amassed hundreds of volumes, chiefly from the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1880 he came across Murray's leaflet of the preceding year, *An Appeal to the English-speaking and English-reading Public*, perhaps inside a periodical or a book he had ordered. Almost certainly as a means of personal redemption, Minor resolved to start working as a reader for the Dictionary. In all, he contributed over 12,000 quotations — sometimes at the rate of over a hundred a week.

In time to come (1899) Murray would say, "so enormous have been Dr. Minor's contributions . . . that we could easily illustrate the last four centuries from his quotations alone".

### ✂ And Murray's first meeting with Minor?

Ever since his first batch of quotations (probably sent in 1880), Minor had come to be regarded by Murray and his colleagues as unflagging, thorough and possessing great lexicographical skills. Yet with so much apparent leisure, why had he never travelled the mere forty miles from Crowthorne to Oxford (an hour by steam train) to meet those who were obviously relishing his thousands of quotations? Winchester writes:

The answer to the deepening mystery . . . was delivered to Doctor Murray by a passing scholar-librarian [Dr. Justin Winsor, librarian of Harvard College], who stopped by at the Scriptorium in 1889 to talk about more serious matters. In the course of a talk that ranged across the entire spectrum of lexicography, he made a chance reference to the Crowthorne doctor. How kind the good James Murray had evidently been to him, remarked the scholar . . .

"You have given great pleasure to Americans . . . by speaking as you do in your Preface of poor Dr. Minor" . . .

"Poor Dr. Minor? . . . What can you possibly mean?"

Once he had learned the facts about Minor's circumstances, it was only a matter of time before James Murray would decide to visit the word-infatuated convict. By then they had been corresponding on Dictionary matters for over a decade, and while during that period Murray had been aware of Minor's address ("Broadmoor, Crowthorne,

Berkshire”), he had always assumed that he was a medical officer at that institution. Murray’s considerate response to the news of Minor’s unique status was typical of this God-loving Calvinist:

I was of course deeply affected by the story, but as Dr. Minor had never in the least alluded to himself or his position, all I could do was to write to him more respectfully and kindly than before, so as to show no notice of this disclosure, which I feared might make some change in our relations.

After writing to Dr. Nicholson, the Broadmoor Governor, Murray arranged to meet Minor in January 1891. From then on, for twenty years, as well as corresponding regularly, they saw each other dozens of times — always at Broadmoor, of course, either walking in the grounds or else in Minor’s cell. As avid as his interest in dictionary making is, Winchester’s central concern remains the life of William Chester Minor, which he narrates with much compassion. Some of the saga will be distasteful to some, but in my opinion nowhere is it sensationalised by Winchester. Not Minor’s prodigious sexual appetite, which began at the age of 13, nor the horrors he underwent as a surgeon during the American Civil War (including the nasty part he was required to play in the punishment of a deserter in 1864). Not the paranoiac murder he committed in London and was convicted for. Not his ongoing delusions in Broadmoor, nor the grisly self-mutilation he perpetrated after 30 years of confinement . . . All are essential to our understanding of this irreparably disturbed man. In fact the mental illness aspects are covered so fully that, along with the two personal and six lexicographical subject entries it has for the book, the Library of Congress catalogue even provides the following entry: “Psychiatric hospital patients — Great Britain — Biography”.

Nevertheless, it goes without saying that the affectionate attention paid by Winchester to Minor’s work for the *OED* is what has captured my own appreciation. Winchester is undeniably enthusiastic about the history of dictionaries and the paramount place the *Oxford* holds in that history, especially in the light of the inadequate dictionaries that had gone before.

An awe-inspiring work . . . the most important reference book ever made, and, given the unending importance of the English language, probably the most important that is ever likely to be.

Winchester pays special attention to Minor’s working methods, describing his neat, microscopic handwriting on quires of four unlined sheets folded to make a quire (an eight-page-thick booklet):

His work would win the admiration and awe of all who would later see it; even today the quires preserved in the dictionary archives are such as to make people gasp.

A great irony of Minor’s case that Winchester has pointed out in interviews is this. Were he living today, being treated with modern drugs for schizophrenia, the lexicographical outcome might have been



quite different. The medicines would have dulled his madness but could well have dulled his genius also, and deprived the world of his wonderful contribution to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

There is much more in Winchester's book, too, including such details as Winston Churchill's role in Minor's eventual relocation in 1910 to an American asylum. To say nothing of the efforts Murray and his wife Ada made to help secure that transfer. Murray's relationship with Minor was such that he and Ada actually came to farewell the frail 76-year-old Minor the day he left, and even arranged for a formal photograph to be taken in the Broadmoor garden.

For the story of William Chester Minor is far from just that of an insane murderer. Sure, we can describe people by their mental state (paranoid schizophrenic). We can choose to pigeon-hole them by profession, too (doctor), or by hobbies (lexicography, painting) . . . But the hardest thing in biography is to get the balance right: one page of misleading emphasis and our subject is a caricature. Which question of emphasis brings me at last to the actual name of Winchester's book.

It's intriguing, isn't it, how sometimes a work is published with different titles in the British Commonwealth and the United States? I won't attempt to account for the respective national marketing psychologies of this practice (though I can guess), but several in the last couple of decades readily come to mind. One of Australian importance was *Schindler's Ark/List* by Thomas Keneally (1982). And now we have Winchester's 1998 biography of Dr. Minor. Here are the U.K. and U.S. details:

Simon Winchester, *The Surgeon of Crowthorne; a Tale of Murder, Madness and the Love of Words*. ISBN 0 670 87862 6. (U.K.)

Simon Winchester, *The Professor and the Madman; a Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*. ISBN 0 060 17596 6. (U.S.)

Whatever the marketing people want to call it, for me the sad yet uplifting story of William Chester Minor and his 20-year colleagueship with James Murray remains one of the compelling highlights of my reading over the past twelve months. I cannot but wholeheartedly recommend it, both to dedicated word lovers and also to readers genuinely empathic to *la condition humaine*.

Overwhelmingly, response to Winchester's biography has been positive. In America and Australia particularly it has been remarkable best-seller. So much so, that there is even talk of a movie, perhaps to star Mel Gibson and Robin Williams. I wonder which part each will get.

To conclude, here are two quotes from the scores of glowing reviews the book has received.

Simon Winchester's "Tale of Murder, Madness and the Love of Words" is as much about the creation of the greatest of dictionaries as of Minor's part in creating it. Today's lexicographers could do a better job in one 20th the time, manipulating the immense computerised corpuses of language now available. That story, however, wouldn't be even one hundredth as fascinating. (Gordon Bilney, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6/2/99)

I found *The Professor and the Madman* both enthralling and moving, in its brilliant reconstruction of a most improbable event: the major contributions made to the great *Oxford English Dictionary* by a deeply delusional, incarcerated "madman", and the development of a true friendship between him and the editor of the *OED*. One sees here the redemptive potential of work and love in even the most deeply, "hopelessly", "psychotic". (Dr. Oliver Sacks, whose neurological cases have formed the basis of such well-known movies as *Awakenings* and *At First Sight*)

# Biography Resource Center

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Smithsonian, Sept 1, 1998 p88(1)

**The Strange Case of the Surgeon at Crowthorne.** (dictionary writers meet) Winchester, Simon.

**Abstract:** Dr. W.C. Minor assisted Dr. James Murray in writing a dictionary, prompting Murray to travel to meet the great mind that helped him. Upon arrival to his destination, Murray discovered that Minor was a convicted murdered being help in a mental institution.

**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 1998 Smithsonian Institution

"I am Dr. James Murray of the London Philological Society and Editor of the New English Dictionary. It is indeed an honor and a pleasure to at long last make your acquaintance -- for you must be, kind sir, my most assiduous helpmeet, Dr. W. C. Minor?"

Popular legend has it that a most remarkable conversation took place on a misty autumn afternoon in 1897, in the small English village of Crowthorne. One of the parties to the colloquy was the formidable James Murray, the then editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, or, as it was called in its early days, the New English Dictionary. On the day in question Murray had traveled 50 miles by train from Oxford to meet an enigmatic figure named Dr. W. C. Minor, who was among the most prolific of the thousands of volunteer contributors whose searches into word origins and meanings were crucial to the dictionary's creation. For very nearly 20 years these two men had corresponded regularly about the finer points of English lexicography. But, so the story goes, they had never met. Dr. Minor never seemed willing or able to leave his home at Crowthorne, never willing to come the 50 miles up to Oxford. He was unable to offer any kind of explanation, nor do more than offer his regrets.

Murray, who himself was rarely free from the burdens of his work at his dictionary headquarters, the famous Scriptorium in Oxford, had long wished to see and to thank his mysterious and intriguing helper, particularly so by the late 1890s when, with the dictionary well under way, official honors were being showered upon all its creators. Murray wanted to make sure that all those involved -- even one so apparently bashful as Dr. Minor -- were fully recognized for the demanding work they had put in. Murray decided that he would pay a visit. "If the mountain would not come to Mahomet, then Mahomet would go to the mountain."

Accordingly, he telegraphed his intentions to Dr. Minor, noting that he would find it most convenient to take a train that arrived at Crowthorne Station just after 2 o'clock on a certain Wednesday in November. By return wire, Dr. Minor said that would be fine; the great lexicographer was indeed expected and would be made most welcome.

At the railway station a polished brougham and a liveried coachman were waiting, and with James Murray aboard they clip-clopped back through the lanes of rural Berkshire and at last drew up outside a huge and rather forbidding red-brick mansion. A solemn servant showed him into a grand and book-lined study, where behind an immense mahogany desk stood a man of undoubted importance. Murray bowed gravely, and launched into the brief speech of greeting that he had so long rehearsed:

"A very good afternoon to you, sir. I am Dr. James Murray of the London Philological Society, and editor of the New English Dictionary. It is indeed an honor and a pleasure to at long last make your acquaintance -- for you must be, kind sir, my most assiduous helpmeet, Dr. W. C. Minor?"

There was a brief pause, an air of momentary mutual embarrassment. A clock ticked loudly. There were muffled footsteps in the hall. And then the man behind the desk cleared his throat, and spoke:

"I regret, kind sir, that I am not. It is not at all as you suppose. I am in fact the superintendent of the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. Dr. Minor is most certainly here. But he is an inmate. He has been a patient here for more than 20 years." William Chester Minor, the man whom Murray visited at Crowthorne, was an American. In 1897 he was 63. Born of American missionary parents on the island of Ceylon, he had spent his teenage years in New Haven, Connecticut, gone to Yale, and later qualified as a surgeon. But a distinctly unkind fate eventually brought him to England and placed him in Broadmoor -- a grim place still standing today -- which had been built shortly before he arrived. It was then the pride and joy of those doctor-scientists who were still called "alienists," eventually to be restyled as clinical psychiatrists. Minor was in Broadmoor because he was quite mad, and because he had committed a murder in London in February 1872.

The crime was as shocking as it was unprecedented, for it was one of the few murders in London to involve the use of a ~~firearm~~. The killing, trial and punishment also provide an astonishing early look at a subject that has lately much preoccupied American courts: the relation between murderous intent, high intelligence and insanity. The killing actually took place around 2:30 one moonlit Saturday night in the run-down Lambeth section of London. Three or perhaps four shots rang out. They were loud, very loud, and they echoed through the cold and smokily damp night air. They were heard and instantly recognized by a young police constable named Henry Tarrant.

When Tarrant heard them he ran toward the sound and met Minor, who was holding a gun. Seizing the murder weapon Tarrant asked, "Whom did you shoot at?" "A man," said Minor. "You don't suppose I would be so cowardly as to shoot a woman?" Two other policemen appeared, and were sent to look after the dying man. A few onlookers began to collect. Blood was gushing onto the pavement -- staining a spot that for many months afterward would be variously described in London's more dramatically minded papers as the location of a "Heinous Crime," a "Terrible Event," an "Atrocious Occurrence" and a "Vile Murder."

The man who died, a Wiltshire farm laborer named George Merritt, has since been almost obliterated by the wash of history. He was one of many country folk who had lately been lured to industrialized London in search of work. He was married to a farm girl named Eliza and had seven children. (Eliza was pregnant with an eighth.) He worked in Lambeth as a night stoker at the Lion Brewery (the landmark lion of which still stands today, outside Waterloo Station). It was pure accident that walking to work so early on that cold morning, he came across, of all people, an American with a gun -- an American tormented by a curiously insane belief.

The American was William Minor. In his deranged mind, he thought George Merritt, an utterly innocent stranger, was actually a vengeful Irishman bent on doing him sinister, even unspeakable, harm -- an Irishman, as he saw it, who needed to be shot dead in self-defense. To understand these grim and bizarre doings requires taking a look back into William Minor's own tragic history, as the English courts promptly did.

Minor appeared, at first, to be one of fortune's favorites, rich, intelligent and of good family. After Yale he joined the Army -- the Union Army, which, the year being 1864, was fighting the Civil War. After a few months' training in a Connecticut hospital, he served as an assistant surgeon in the Northern army, and was sent into battle against the Confederates.

He was by all accounts a sensitive man. He read a good deal, painted in watercolors, played the flute. Perhaps not the ideal candidate to handle the rough and bloody work of war, he was particularly ill-prepared to deal with the dreadful slaughterhouse known as the Battle of the Wilderness.

The battle began when General Grant's army crossed the Rapidan River and ended, after just 50 hours, with 25,000 dead and wounded. The rifle fire was so thick and so close that it not only killed men but cut off whole trees at shoulder height and set the Virginia underbrush afire. Hundreds and hundreds of men, the wounded as well as the fit, were burned to death.

The "ammunition trains exploded," one soldier wrote; "the dead were roasted in the conflagration; the wounded ... dragged themselves along with their torn and mangled limbs, in the mad energy of despair, to escape.... It seemed as though Christian men had turned to fiends, and hell itself had usurped the place of earth."

Many of the men caught up in the battle happened to be Irish -- men who, suffering from famine across the Atlantic, migrated to America and got work as soldiers in the Union Army for \$13 a month.

Scores of soldiers had begun to desert. Desertion, the high command decreed, must be stopped. Not by execution; the ranks were too thin to permit so many men to be literally stricken from the rolls. Instead, deserters were to be humiliated, then returned to the line; punished, and sent back into the fight.

Anyone leaving his post would be subjected to savage official abuse, the aim being to make sure he didn't desert again. A deserter could, for example, be gagged with a bayonet, the blade tied across his open mouth with twine, or be suspended by his thumbs.

In some cases -- and this was deemed a perfect combination of pain and humiliation -- deserters were branded, the letter D seared into a cheek, or chest or buttock. Regulations became quite specific on this point -- a letter an inch and a half high could either be burned on with a hot iron, or cut with a razor and the wound then filled with black powder, to cause irritation and indelibility.

Branding, it was claimed at William Minor's London trial, was what the young doctor had been forced to do. It is easy to imagine the situation. An Irish deserter, convicted by a drumhead court of running from the terrors of the Wilderness, is sentenced to be branded. The officers of the court decide that the new acting assistant surgeon, this fresh-faced and genteel-looking Yalie, should carry out the punishment. It will be as good a way as any, the older, war-weary officers imply,



to introduce Dr. Minor to the rigors of war. And so the Irish deserter is brought to him, arms shackled behind his back.

He is exhausted and frightened. He is dirty and unkempt. His uniform is torn to rags by a frantic, desperate run through the brambles. He wants to go back home to Ireland. He begs for a chance to see his family again. He may expect one day to use what soldiering skills he has learned in Grant's army to fight against the British occupiers of his homeland.

Doubtless he pleads with the court; he pleads with his guards. He cries, he screams, he struggles. But the soldiers hold him down, and Dr. Minor takes the red-hot branding iron from a basket of glowing coals hastily borrowed from the brigade farrier. Minor hesitates for a moment -- a hesitation that betrays his own reluctance. The officers grunt for him to continue -- and he presses the glowing metal onto the deserter's cheek. The flesh sizzles and steams, the prisoner screams and screams.

And then it is over. The wretch is led away, holding to his injured cheek the alcohol-soaked rag that Minor has given him. Perhaps the wound will become infected, will fill with the "laudable pus" that other doctors have said hints at cure. Perhaps it will fester and crust with sores. Perhaps it will blister and burst and bleed for weeks.

By any accounting such a man would have ample reason to want, one day, to wreak his revenge on the man who tortured him.

As for William Chester Minor, the vision of this Irishman would haunt him for the rest of his life, filling his nights with waking nightmares, paranoid visions of vengeful spirits bent on exacting horrible retribution. He grew fearful of all Irishmen -- imagining that not only his branded victim but the man's friends and relations and colleagues were after him. Indeed, he thought every Irish man jack in creation would come in the night, find him and, as he put it, "abuse him shamefully." All because he had been ordered to inflict so cruel a punishment on one of their number in America.

If that seems far-fetched, it was suggested during his trial that sometime after the branding, William Minor began to spiral downward into madness. He was steadily to become a sufferer from what in those days was called dementia praecox, what modern-day medicine defines as schizophrenia -- though whether a branding would exacerbate this condition long term, is doubtful. In any case, he became delusional, violent, suspicious. He began to have horrible dreams in which, night after night, "people" would wake him and transport him to distant seraglios where he would be forced to perform unnatural acts with men, young children, animals. Today he could go into therapy, or be treated with sophisticated, psychotropic drugs, such as risperidone, which allow some schizophrenics to function with fair normality in society. Back then there was almost nothing that could be done for him.

He retired from the Army, though not before fighting for and winning a lifetime pension from the authorities -- fellow officers who, in a kindly way, agreed that his illness doubtless had been contracted in the line of duty, as a result of war. So Minor became a veteran, sickly and with shattered nerves, because of service to his country. It was in this sadly afflicted condition that Minor was sent by his parents to England. They wanted him to settle down, to live life at a slower and more untroubled pace, to paint, to mingle with great minds, to try to redeem himself. They had a friend who knew the great art critic and drawing master John Ruskin, and they equipped their son with a letter of introduction to him, the better to gain entry to the English capital's beau monde.

Instead, for reasons that no one was able to elucidate, Dr. Minor took rooms in the lowest and meanest parts of London, possibly to gain easy access to women of the night. And when he killed a man, he said that the man was one of the Irish who loomed so large in his persecutorial delusions. George Merritt was the soon-forgotten victim; his murderer, the court decided, was a man who must be put away for the rest of his life in Broadmoor Asylum, locked up in a cell overlooking the green Berkshire countryside. He was to be detained, the authorities decreed in the sentencing language of the time, "During Her Majesty's Pleasure."

And there Minor would have rotted away for the remainder of a lifetime, except that one day in the summer of 1880, he came across a slip of paper tucked into a book that he had ordered from a library in London. "An Appeal for Readers," the paper was headed. It was an invitation for interested and scholarly people to help in assembling an ambitious publication in progress at Oxford University and eventually to be called the New English Dictionary, the biggest expository collection of English words and their senses that had ever been created in the history of the English language.

Minor was intrigued. He had plenty of money and long since had established connections with bookstores by mail. He was himself a considerable reader and book collector. A model inmate during the day, and an inmate of means, he was allowed to occupy two cells in Broadmoor's relatively relaxed Cell Block Two, one of them equipped as a library. (In the other room, in which he slept, he had had the floors covered with zinc -- to keep the demons from coming up through the floorboards at night.) A manservant helped him organize his books.

Astonishingly, he had also forged a relationship with young Eliza Merritt, the widow of the man he had shot dead. She said she had forgiven him -- not least, it is perhaps cynically appropriate to remark, because, by way of apology and reparation,

Minor had settled some money on her and her children.

Eliza was allowed to visit him in his cell every now and then. Minor persuaded her to bring him parcels of antiquarian books from the great dealers in central London. Since he was able to add to his library at will, he surmised after reading James Murray's "Appeal" that he was in an ideal position to become an invisible scholar, a constant contributor to this noble and redeeming dictionary project.

Off went a note to Murray, at the oddly named Scriptorium -- the dictionary's headquarters, first in London's Mill Hill district, and then, for the remaining three decades until Murray's death, on the Banbury Road in Oxford. Minor gave his address merely as Crowthorne, Berkshire, and wrote to inquire if he might be able to help. He had a reasonable knowledge of 16th- and 17th-century English literature, he said. And he had a fair amount of time on his hands.

Murray said later that the letter from Crowthorne came very soon after the beginning of his work on the dictionary -- probably 1880, or perhaps 1881. Dr. Minor, he was to write, "proved to be a very good reader, who wrote to me often. I thought that he must be a retired medical man with plenty of available time."

The work that Murray demanded of some thousands of volunteers was of a kind peculiar to the style of this pioneering dictionary. Murray and his predecessors had decided that each and every word in English, and each and every sense of each and every word, needed to be supported by an illustrative quotation. And that, if possible, the uses would include the earliest known in English and an example from each century thereafter. One of the first uses found of the word "pig," for example, was as a plural noun in Chaucer's *The Reeve's Tale*, from the 14th century: "And in the floor, with nose and mouth to-broke, They walwe as doon two pigges in a poke."

As the work progressed through the alphabet, readers like William Minor were supposed to scour all English literature and send in cards quoting findings and uses, for every meaning, every word, every variant form.

In the end the editors accumulated a ton of such paper contributions -- millions of small cards, made up by thousands of volunteers not only from all over England and Ireland and Scotland but in some cases America as well, with handwritten notations and quotations and references culled from English-language books and newspapers and magazines written and edited from every century since the ninth, when a significant number of documents in English had accumulated.

William Minor was among the best and most assiduous of the contributors. He sent in cards by the score, by the thousand, eventually by the tens of thousands. Quotations, meticulously written and noted and bundled and annotated, cascaded from large brown manila envelopes out onto the desks of the subeditors at the Scriptorium, delighting Murray, and proving time and again that he had been right to believe in his strategy of finding volunteers -- and especially volunteers of Dr. Minor's quality -- as the best and most economical means of assembling his dictionary.

Each time Murray found himself basking in the pleasure of receiving yet another batch of contributions from the surgeon at Crowthorne, he would write back immediately, offering his thanks, suggesting that the good doctor might like to come up to Oxford and receive in person the thanks and admiration that his meticulous and perceptive labors deserved.

But the good doctor, as we know, never came. He dissembled. He made excuses about infirmity, shyness, the physical impossibility of his coming up to Oxford. And for years James Murray accepted it all as eccentricity, and shrugged his shoulders. Lexicographical volunteers were a rum bunch (one, Henry Furnivall, assembled rowing crews of buxom waitresses charmed out of a Hammersmith tea shop); if William Minor was a recluse down in Crowthorne, then so be it.

And yet, he was so good, so keen, so energetic -- and so tantalizingly close. Murray really wanted badly to see him. The matter came to a head as a result of what has ever since been known as the Great Dictionary Dinner.

It was 1897, a Jubilee Year, the 60th year of Queen Victoria's reign, and Oxford was more than in the mood for a party. The dictionary was going well. The progress, faltering in the early years, had accelerated -- the section from Anta to Battening was finished in 1885, Battenlie-Bozzom in 1887, Bra-Byzen in 1888. A new efficiency had settled over the Scriptorium. As the crowning glory, Queen Victoria had in 1897 "graciously agreed," as the court liked to say, that the whole dictionary could be dedicated to her. They had just completed Volume III -- embracing the letters D and E.

An aura of majestic permanence had all of a sudden invested the dictionary project. There was no doubt now that it would eventually be completed -- for since it had been regally approved, who could now ever brook its cancellation? The queen had done her part, so now Oxford, in high mood for celebration, decided it could follow suit. James Murray deserved to be given honors and thanks, and who more appropriate than the great man's adopted university to bestow them.

The university's new vice-chancellor decided that a big dinner -- a "slap-up," to employ a phrase that the dictionary was to

quote from 1823 -- should be held in Murray's honor. It would be staged in the huge hall at Queen's College, where by old tradition a scholar with a silver trumpet would sound a fanfare to summon guests in to dine. It would celebrate what the Times, on the day of the dinner, proclaimed to be "the greatest effort probably which any university, it may be any printing press, has taken in hand since the invention of printing.... It will not be the least of the glories of the University of Oxford to have completed this gigantic task." The evening would be a memorable Oxford event.

As indeed it was. The long tables were splendidly decorated. The menu might be forthright and English -- clear turtle soup, turbot with a lobster sauce, haunch of mutton, roast partridges, Queen Mab pudding, strawberry ice, but like the dictionary itself, it was also flavored generously, but not too generously, with hints of Gallicisms: sweetbreads a la Villeroi, grenadins of veal, ramequins. There were no fewer than 14 speeches -- James Murray on the entire history of the making of the dictionary, the head of the Oxford University Press on his belief that the project was a great duty to the nation, and the egregious Henry Furnivall -- as lively and amusing as ever, he had taken time out from recruiting waitresses to go a-rowing with him -- on what he saw as Oxford's heartless attitude toward the admission of women.

Among the guests, along with all the great and the good of the academic land, were some of the most capable and energetic of the volunteer readers. But not the most energetic of all, William Minor. He was invited, of course, but he never showed. His absence saddened James Murray, more than at any time before. And so a few days later we approach the scene with which this story begins.

Though they may have met once before -- Murray's letters suggest they probably did -- according to legend their fateful first meeting occurred after the famous brougham ride through the lanes of Berkshire.

Whenever it happened, for both men the first sight of each other must have been peculiar indeed, for they were uncannily similar in appearance. Both were extravagantly bearded. Portraits of Minor have an air of avuncular kindliness; Murray looks much the same, but with a trace of the severity that might well mark a lowland Scot from a Connecticut Yankee.

Each man might have imagined, for a second, that, rather than meeting a stranger, he was stepping toward himself in a looking glass.

Over several years, the two met a number of times. By all accounts they got on famously -- a liking that was subject only to Dr. Minor's moods, to which Murray became fully sensible as time passed. Murray often had the foresight before each visit to telegraph, asking how the patient was; if Minor was in low spirits and angry, Murray remained at Oxford; if he was low and likely to be comforted, then Murray would board the train.

When the weather was poor, the two men would sit together in Minor's room -- a small and practically furnished cell not too dissimilar from a typical Oxford student's room, and just like the room that Murray was to be given at Balliol College once he was made an honorary fellow. It was lined with bookshelves, all of which were open except for one glass-fronted case that held the rarest of the 16th- and 17th-century works from which much of Minor's dictionary research was being done. The fireplace crackled merrily. Tea and Dundee cake were brought in -- one of the many privileges that the superintendent accorded to his now distinguished patient.

And so the years passed, the passion for English words uniting the two old men, the differing dynamics of insanity and anonymity and distinction dividing them.

But just at the turn of the 20th century, a terrible tragedy suddenly befell Dr. Minor, a savage self-mutilation, done, he felt, to remove him from sexual exploitation by the demons of the night. This wounding enfeebled him. His work for the great book began slowly to fall away. He seemed to lose interest, at a point meticulously noted by the stern editors at the press as occurring at the time he was gathering quotations for the letter Q.

Shocked and deeply concerned, James Murray suggested to members of the government -- now that he had been knighted and showered with honors -- that the old man ought to be released. Minor was in failing health, he said, and harmless. Whitehall's bureaucrats and Westminster's politicians should let him go back to America, to die among his own people.

It was not until 1910 that the government, wearied by Murray's badgering, agreed. It fell to the young Winston Churchill, as Home Secretary, to sign the papers granting Minor's release and, more out of formality than spite, order that he be deported, forever forbidden to reenter the United Kingdom. Back in Connecticut, the family agreed to provide an escort. Sir James Murray went down to Broadmoor to say fond farewells. He brought with him a court photographer, who would take a final portrait of the brilliant old volunteer: a sepia image that still speaks of scholarship and friendship, of wisdom and pain. It is somehow a very touching picture, cracked and frail and venerable, much like the subject himself.

In April 1910, the steamer Minnetonka left England, bearing Dr. Minor home to New York, in the company of his brother Alfred, who for years had borne up as well as he could under the knowledge that his brother was mad, but clearly not bad,

much less dangerous to know.

It was years before he actually got home. His first stop was Washington, D.C., and what is now St. Elizabeths hospital for the insane. The American government consigned him there for nearly a decade before letting the family take him back to Connecticut, where he died at age 85 in the spring of 1920. (He is buried in New Haven's fashionable Evergreen Cemetery with a small brown sandstone marker on his grave.) William Chester Minor's name appears, without a hint of his scandalous secret, in the preface to the Oxford English Dictionary. This story has been adapted from Simon Winchester's new book, *The Professor and the Madman*, published this month by HarperCollins. Robert Steele lives and works in San Francisco.

**Document Number:** A53114291

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## The Professor and the Madman

### OED

Other leading books—

--Robert Cawdry publishes a list in 1604 of 120 pages, 2500 entries.

--Seven major dictionaries introduced in 17<sup>th</sup> c. England.

--Samuel Johnson—disagreement with Swift. Swift wants lang. Fixed for purity of the lang. Johnson realizes it's impossible to make a fix on the tongue. Johnson and team browse through all existing writings. Don't go further back than Shakespeare, Bacon, Edmund Spenser. Notes every use of every word of the day; uses illustrative quotes. 43,500 words. Published in 1755; 6 years in the making. Remains the standard for the next century. Has his critics-unprofessional with too much of Johnson in it. A Tory bias.

--For OED want an inventory of the language. Don't include on the basis of good or bad words. Took more than 75 years to create the 12 volumes of the first ed. Of OED.

Completed in 1928. Five supplements follow and 50 yrs. later comes a 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (a 20 vol. Work). Uses quotations to illustrate the use of the sense of every single word. Shows how a word has been used over the centuries, undergoing changes of meaning, spelling.

Shows when each word entered the language. Began in 1850's. Philological society meets in 1857 in London. The spread of English equals the spread of Christianity. No dictionary 400 yrs ago. Must be the work of 100's of volunteer—22 years later the work gets off the ground. Eventually receive more than 6 million slips of paper. Volunteers get bored at the beginning and quit. Murray becomes the editor. Builds a Scriptorium to edit the dictionary. A plea for more volunteers and one paper finds its way to Minor who has been at Broadmoor for 8 yrs.

**Dr. James Murray**—born in 1837 in Scotland. Left school at 14 because was too poor and was self-taught. First wife dies and remarries Ada. Has 11 children.  
Dies in 1915

**Dr. William C. Minor**—Born in 1834 in Ceylon from a very pious missionary family. Mother dies when he was 3, father remarries soon after and settles in the Malay Peninsula. Can speak many Asian languages. Sent to U.S. when 14, already noticing native girls. Attends Yale and studies medicine. Joins the Union Army as a Dr. four days after the Battle of Gettysbury. Working in New Haven and wants to be where the war is. Battle of the Wilderness unhinges him and he sees fighting for the first time. Grant meets Lee and 27,000 die within the space of 5 hours. Sees bullets that inflict huge wounds, hand-to-hand combat with bayonets/sabers and brush that catches fire and 100's, maybe 1,000's burn to death. Gets a commission into the upper ranks and is transferred to New York. An excellent dr., but a questionable moral character. Cholera epidemic also brought by Irish immigrants to Ellis Island. Minor helps out and becomes a captain,. Paranoia starts to set in and he carries a gun around. Becomes promiscuous and gets venereal infection. He's shipped to the countryside to avoid temptation. Demoted to Florida and becomes angry at the army. Takes up painting, but becomes delusional and

sent to asylum for 18 months. Formally placed on Army Retirement List and receive pension his whole life. Came to England to “quiet his inflamed mind”. Frequented prostitutes often, which is why he settled in Lambeth instead of better part of London. “Prodigious sexual appetite.” Had gonorrhea. Painted watercolors of high quality. Afraid of the Irish; makes Irish landlady fire her Irish servants. Beginnings of mental illness when complained to police that men were coming to his rooms to poison him. Makes landlady move furniture. Men molesting him during the night. At trial, found him legally innocent of murder, but detained in safe custody (forever?). Sent to Broadmoor. Starts having delusion of small boys in the rafters, chloroforming him at night and forcing him to perform indecent acts. Writes to Mrs. Merrett and she visits him and brings him books for a while (7 yrs. After the murder) Stumbles on the card for OED? Makes up word lists for every word he thinks worthy of inclusion. First word was “art”. Sends off first packet in 1885 for almost every week for the next 20 yrs. 1895—head of asylum replaced and Minor is declining steadily. Want him to go back to US. And family, but new dr. refuses. 1902-cuts off penis. Had become religious and view self as vile. In Broadmoor for 30 yrs. It’s longest patient. 1919-nephew petitions to have him released to hospital in Hartford after living another 10 yrs. At St. Elizabeth’s in Washington.

**Irish Brigade**—fight on the Union side. Feel used and start to desert, a chronic problem. Forms of punishment—p. 59 Branded with the letter “D” and Minor is forced to do that. Thinks the man will come back to get him.

**George Merrett**-shovels coal in the dawn shift. Has a big family

**Broadmoor**—Minor sent to Block 2, kept for parole patients because he is a man of means. Given 2 cells, unlocked during the day. Has his personal effects with him; drawing materials and books. Pays another patient to clean his room.

Corresponded for 20 years. Relationship starts in 1880 or 1881. Murray assumes he’s a retired med. Officer. Dinner to celebrate dic. And Queen’s golden Jubilee 1897 and Minor is invited.

Famous story—by 1896 dictionary is half completed. Wishes to thank Minor. Goes to Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. Minor there for over 20 years by then. Crime happened on Feb. 17, 1872. Created by Am. Journalist Hayden Church. First appears in 1915. A letter in possession of Minor’s relative reveals the truth of the meeting.

## Questions

The book was originally published as “The Surgeon of Crowthorne: A Tale of Murder, Madness and the love of words”. What is gained by the new title?

How are the two lead characters similar? In what sense are they both prisoners?

This story charts the history of the English dictionaries. Anything you find surprising about the subject? Shakespeare’s writings. Can the lack of a definitive dictionary affect the development of a language?

Minor’s work is undoubtedly therapeutic, but does he redeem himself with it? What would have happened if his condition was treatable at the time?

One insight offered by the book is the treatment of the mentally ill at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Is it surprising that Minor was so well-treated after the murder of George Merrett. It is interesting that conditions in the asylum got markedly worse as it entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rather than better.

Comment on the photograph on the front page. How would you describe this person? Educated? His clothes?

Similarities between Murray and Minor, especially as they were growing up.

Why does Winchester include the false story of the first meeting as well as the true one?

Some of the early English dictionary writers tried to “fix” the language. Can a language be fixed? In what way do languages change? Is it a good idea to prevent foreign words from entering a language?

“By telling the poignant and human tale of William Minor, I could perhaps create some kind of prism through which to view the greater and even more fascinating story of the history of English lexicography.” Could the story of the making of the OED stand on its own or was it necessary to bring in this human element? Which story did you find more interesting, the story of the book or the story of the men?

Book dedicated to the memory of G.M. Read page 225. “But the principal tragic figure in this strange tale is the man who is the least well remembered...”

Small things that add to the tale. Winchester comes across the discarded letterpress printing plates that had been used to print the OED. He keeps page 452, encompassing the words “humoral” to “humor”. Carried it around for years, taking it to the U.S., where finally a letterpress printer makes two printings of the plate, one red and one blue and puts the plate in the middle.

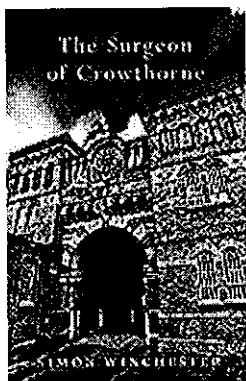
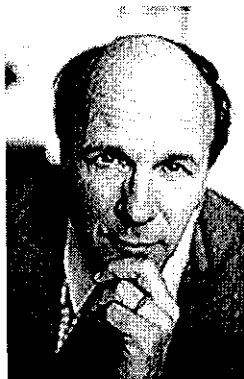
Last chapter with the acknowledgements—must gain access to files. Access to Broadmoor and to huge files on patients was key to cracking the story. A few weeks passed before Winchester was allowed in. St. Elizabeth's in Washington is no longer a federal institution, but run by the gov't of District of Columbia. At first the hospital refused to release any of its files, and suggested Winchester get a lawyer and sue to get the files. Made a search on the WWW at the National Archives that suggested files were still under fed. Jurisdiction. Through a few requests through the Internet, was able to get 700 pages of case notes and other miscellaneous items. Oxford University Press very helpful; had much in their press archives. Research on Minor's life through the New Haven Historical Society; his early life in Ceylon through Yale Divinity Library. U.S. National Archives comes through with Minor's military files. Walter Reed Hospital has Minor's autopsy reports. National Park Service has access to military bases where he had been stationed in New York and Florida. Virginia Orange County Tourist Office took Winchester to site where Battle of the Wilderness had occurred. Person at a museum in Gordonville, Va. That used to be a hotel/hospital explained Civil War medical practice. Found out about Civil War branding and its effects on Irishmen who fought in the Civil War. Learned about the origins of mental illness. Found info from Minor's great-great nephew, and info about George Merrett from one of his descendants.

## Winchester

Born Sept, 1944. Educated at St. Catherine's College Oxford, M.A. 1966. Has lived in Africa, Indian, and Asia. Religion is Church of England. He is a well-known British writer, journalist and broadcaster who has worked as a foreign correspondent for much of his career. Reporter for the *Journal*, Newcastle upon Tyne, England from 1967-1970. The *Guradian* in London as a correspondent in Northern Ireland from 1970-1972, in Washington DC from 1972-1976 and in New Delhi, India from 1977-1979. Went to the *Daily Mail* in London as the chief U.S. correspondent in Washington D.C. from 1979-1980. *Sunday Times*, London as a senior feature writer from 1981-present? Has won several awards, including Britain's Journalist of the Year. While reporting from the Falkland Islands, he was arrested on spying charges and imprisoned for 3 months. Wrote a book "Prison Diary" based on his experiences. Now lives in New York and works as a freelance writer.

Talk of a movie starring Mel Gibson and Robin Williams





X This book was originally published as *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*. What is gained by the new title? How similar are the two protagonists? In what sense are they both prisoners?

This story charts the history of English dictionaries. What do you find surprising about this subject? How does the lack of a definitive dictionary affect the development of the language?

X Minor's work on the dictionary is undoubtedly therapeutic, but, in your opinion, does he redeem himself? Consider what might have happened if his condition had been treatable at that time.

**Library Journal**, August 1998 v123 n13 p114(1)

**The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary.** (book reviews) Sawyer, Michael.

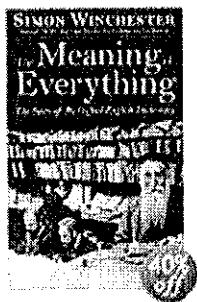
**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 1998 Cahners Business Information

Winchester, Simon. *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*. HarperCollins. Sept. 1998. c.240p. illus. ISBN 0-06-017596-6. \$20. CRIME

William C. Minor (1834-1920) was a Civil War surgeon whose war experience caused his personality to change. He became paranoid and was eventually diagnosed as schizophrenic. After three years in an asylum, he went to Europe in 1871 in pursuit of rest, getting as far as London before his paranoia caught up with him and he killed George Merritt. An English court found him not guilty on the ground of insanity, and Minor was sent to Broadmoor. Coming across a leaflet for volunteers to help compile a history of the English language, Minor offered his services, remaining vague about his background. After 17 years of correspondence, the editor of the Oxford English Dictionary came to meet Minor, who had submitted 10,000 definitions to the project, and was surprised that the genius was a patient at the Broadmoor Asylum. Finally released in 1910, Minor returned to the United States. Winchester's (*The River at the Center of the World*, LJ 10/15/96) delightful, simply written book tells how a murderer made a huge contribution to what became a major reference source in the Western world. Highly recommended.

## The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary

by Simon Winchester



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## Editorial Reviews

### *From Publishers Weekly*

With his usual winning blend of scholarship and accessible, skillfully paced narrative, Winchester (Krakatoa) returns to the subject of his first bestseller, *The Professor and the Madman*, to tell the eventful, personality-filled history of the definitive English dictionary. He emphasizes that the OED project began in 1857 as an attempt to correct the deficiencies of existing dictionaries, such as Dr. Samuel Johnson's. Winchester opens with an entertaining and informative examination of the development of the English language and pre-OED efforts. The originators of the OED thought the project would take perhaps a decade; it actually took 71 years, and Winchester explores why. An early editor, Frederick Furnivall, was completely disorganized (one sack of paperwork he shipped to his successor, James Murray, contained a family of mice). Murray in turn faced obstacles from Oxford University Press, which initially wanted to cut costs at the expense of quality. Winchester stresses the immensity and difficulties of the project, which required hundreds of volunteer readers and assistants (including J.R.R. Tolkien) to create and organize millions of documents: the word bondmaid was left out of the first edition because its paperwork was lost. Winchester successfully brings readers inside the day-to-day operations of the massive project and shows us the unrelenting passion of people such as Murray and his overworked, underpaid staff who, in the end, succeeded magnificently. Winchester's book will be required reading for word mavens and anyone interested in the history of our marvelous, ever-changing language.

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### *From Booklist*

The story of the making of the *Oxford English Dictionary* has been burnished into legend over the years, at least among librarians and linguists. In *The Professor and the Madman* (1998), Winchester examined the strange case of one of the most prolific contributors to the first edition of the OED--one W. C. Minor, an American who sent most of his quotation slips from an insane asylum. Now, Winchester takes on the dictionary's whole history, from the first attempts to document the English language in the seventeenth century, the founding of the Philological Society in Oxford in 1842, and the start of work on the dictionary in 1860; to the completion of the first edition nearly 70 years, 414,825 words, and

1,827,306 illustrative quotations later. Although there is plenty of detail here about the methodology (including the famous pigeon holes stuffed with quotations slips from contributors around the world), the emphasis is on personalities, in particular James Murray, who became the OED's third editor in 1879 and died in 1915, "well into the letter T." The project backers complained loudly about the slow pace over the years, but the scrupulous care taken by Murray and the many others who worked on the OED gave us what is arguably the world's greatest dictionary. Publication of this book coincides with the OED's seventy-fifth anniversary, even as work on the third edition is under way. *Mary Ellen Quinn*  
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**-William F. Buckley, The New York Times Book Review**

"Teeming with knowledge and alive with insights. Winchester handles humor and awe with modesty and cunning."

**-Gregory Kirshchling, Entertainment Weekly**

"Peculiarly inspiring...And Winchester's involving and gregarious narration is nearly Dickensian. Even his footnotes twinkle."

**-Woody West, The Washington Times**

"This book, to get right to it, is a delight...a superb account."

**-David Kirby, Chicago Tribune**

"Entrancing...'The Meaning of Everything' is such an engaging read."

**Book Description**

From the best-selling author of *The Professor and the Madman*, *The Map That Changed the World*, and *Krakatoa* comes a truly wonderful celebration of the English language and of its unrivaled treasure house, the Oxford English Dictionary. Writing with marvelous brio, Winchester first serves up a lightning history of the English language--"so vast, so sprawling, so wonderfully unwieldy"--and pays homage to the great dictionary makers, from "the irredeemably famous" Samuel Johnson to the "short, pale, smug and boastful" schoolmaster from New Hartford, Noah Webster. He then turns his unmatched talent for story-telling to the making of this most venerable of dictionaries. In this fast-paced narrative, the reader will discover lively portraits of such key figures as the brilliant but tubercular first editor Herbert Coleridge (grandson of the poet), the colorful, boisterous Frederick Furnivall (who left the project in a shambles), and James Augustus Henry Murray, who spent a half-century bringing the project to fruition. Winchester lovingly describes the nuts-and-bolts of dictionary making--how unexpectedly tricky the dictionary entry for marzipan was, or how fraternity turned out so much longer and monkey so much more ancient than anticipated--and how bondmaid was left out completely, its slips found lurking under a pile of books long after the B-volume had gone to press. We visit the ugly corrugated iron structure that Murray grandly dubbed the Scriptorium--the Scrippy or the Shed, as locals called it--and meet some of the legion of volunteers, from Fitzedward Hall, a bitter hermit obsessively devoted to the OED, to W. C. Minor, whose story is one of dangerous madness, ineluctable sadness, and ultimate redemption. *The Meaning of Everything* is a scintillating account of the creation of the greatest monument ever erected to a living language. Simon Winchester's supple, vigorous prose illuminates this dauntingly ambitious project--a seventy-year odyssey to create the grandfather of all word-books, the world's unrivalled uber-dictionary.



## Profile: Broadmoor mental hospital

**Broadmoor opened as a mental institution in May 1863, and has since become synonymous with some of Britain's most notorious criminals. As investigations into alleged abuse of female patients continue, BBC News Online profiles the hospital.**

When Broadmoor began life in the 1860s the attitude towards mental health was radically different.

Asylums were kept as far away from normal communities as possible - an 'out of sight, out of mind' mentality.

The Broadmoor 'criminal lunatic asylum', as it was called, was opened in 1863 with 95 female patients. A block for male patients followed a year later.

The hospital was built after the passing of the Criminal Lunatics Act of 1860 - also called the Broadmoor Act.

It drew attention to the poor conditions in British asylums such as Bethlehem Hospital, which was known as 'Bedlam'.

It also followed the setting up of the McNaughton Rules, a series of questions which determined whether a person was too insane to be charged with a criminal offence.

The site covered 290 acres (116 hectares) on the edge of the Berkshire moors some 32 miles from London.

The asylum was "intended for the reception, safe custody and treatment of persons who had committed crimes while actually insane or who became insane whilst undergoing sentence of punishment".

The imposing building was designed by Major General Joshua Jebb, a military engineer who is said to have based the building off two other hospitals - Wakefield in Britain and Turkey's Scutari Hospital.

The site also included cultivated land and 57 cottages for the use of staff. Even a school was built on the grounds.

Security was reported to be very lax during the asylum's early years. The first Physician Superintendent, Dr John Meyer, was attacked by a patient while attending a service at the asylum's chapel soon after it opened.

Security improved after Dr Orange took over as the second head of the asylum a few years later.

### Famous patient

The asylum hosted some of the British Empire's most notorious criminals. Roderick MacLean,

who shot at Queen Victoria at Windsor Station, was sent here in 1882 after being found "not guilty by reason of insanity".

Possibly the most famous, though, was Dr William Chester Minor, the former US Army physician who spent 38 years in the hospital after killing a man outside his house in London after going insane.

While staying in Broadmoor, Dr Minor, a learned scholar with an enormous library, sent thousands of citations and quotations to the first Oxford English Dictionary.

Broadmoor changed from institution to hospital after the 1948 Criminal Justice Act.

In 1952 security was stepped up after a patient, J.T Straffe, escaped and killed a young girl while he was at large. Now there is a siren at the hospital - if it sounds, local schools and institutions have to lock their doors.

A cordon is also set up around the nearby village of Crowthorn and each car checked by the police.

In recent decades, the hospital's inmates have come to include Peter Sutcliffe, the 'Yorkshire Ripper' jailed for murdering prostitutes in the north of England in the 1970s.

It also houses some of the country's most serious sex offenders.

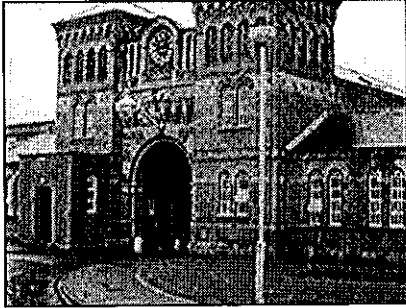
More recently, the hospital has been dogged by accusations of high levels of sexual abuse suffered by female patients.

It has been claimed a woman tried to hang herself last year after alleging she had been raped on a sports field by a fellow patient.

Story from BBC NEWS:  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/uk/2828945.stm>

Published: 2003/03/07 14:17:14 GMT

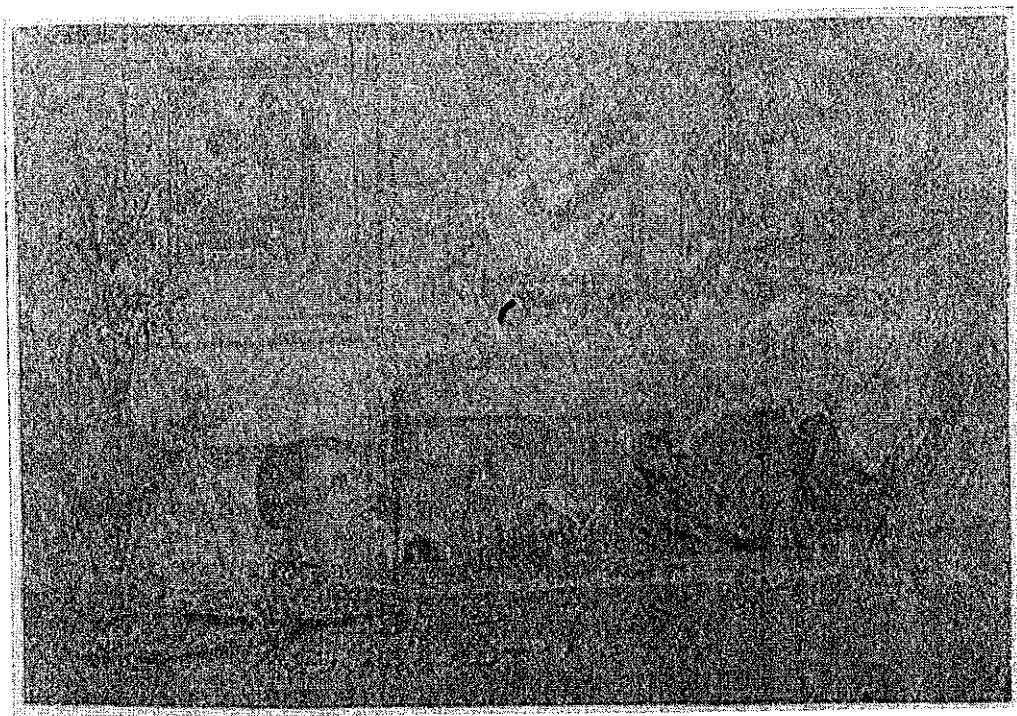
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Broadmoor



-Richard  
Dodd  
"The Turk"



"The Child's Problem"



What are the main differences between the OED and ODO?

**The *OED* and the dictionaries in *ODO* are themselves very different. While *ODO* focuses on the current language and practical usage, the *OED* shows how words and meanings have changed over time.**

The dictionary content in *ODO* focuses on current English and includes modern meanings and uses of words. Where words have more than one meaning, the most important and common meanings in modern English are given first, and less common and more specialist or technical uses are listed below. The *OED*, on the other hand, is a historical dictionary and it forms a record of all the core words and meanings in English over more than 1,000 years, from Old English to the present day, and including many obsolete and historical terms. Meanings are ordered chronologically in the *OED*, according to when they were first recorded in English, so that senses with the earliest evidence of usage appear first and more recent senses appear further down the entry – like a ‘family tree’ for each word.

Both the *OED* and *ODO* contain a wealth of evidence from real English to show how words are used in context. In the *OED* each word meaning is illustrated by a set of quotations, spanning perhaps many centuries, from the earliest recorded appearance to the most recent recorded usages. In *ODO*, the evidence is derived from the 2.3 billion word Oxford English Corpus, a huge databank of 21st century English, and each word sense in the dictionary is linked to a set of sentences so you can see how people are using the language today.

If you are looking for practical help or advice on how to use English in writing and speaking today, then *ODO* will provide you with the information you need. If you're also interested in how our language has developed over time or want to dig deeper into its origins or variations around the world, then the *OED* is the definitive resource.

## **Available language pairs**

### **Chinese-English; English-Chinese**

Currently featuring over 670,000 words, phrases, and translations from the *Oxford Chinese Dictionary*, plus tools and resources

[Buy the print version of the \*Oxford Chinese Dictionary\*](#)

### **French-English; English-French**

Currently featuring over 360,000 words and phrases and over 550,000 translations from the *Oxford-Hachette French Dictionary* (Fourth edition), plus tools and resources

[Buy the print version of the \*Oxford-Hachette French Dictionary\*](#)

### **German-English; English-German**

Currently featuring over 320,000 words and phrases and over 520,000 translations from the *Oxford German Dictionary* (Third edition), plus tools and resources

[Buy the print version of the \*Oxford German Dictionary\*](#)

### **Italian-English; English-Italian**

Currently featuring over 300,000 words and phrases and over 450,000 translations from the *Oxford-Paravia Italian Dictionary* (Third edition), plus tools and resources

[Buy the print version of the \*Oxford-Paravia Italian Dictionary\*](#)

### **Russian-English; English-Russian**

Currently featuring over 500,000 words, phrases, and translations from the *Oxford Russian Dictionary* (Fourth edition), plus tools and resources

[Buy the print version of the \*Oxford Russian Dictionary\*](#)

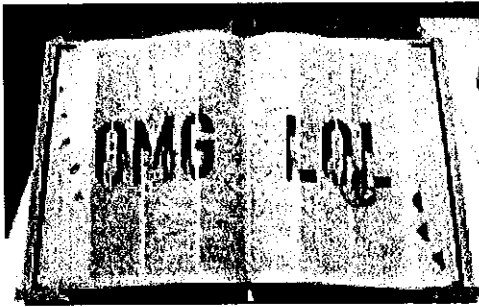
### **Spanish-English; English-Spanish**

Currently featuring over 300,000 words and phrases and 500,000 translations from the *Oxford Spanish Dictionary* (Fourth edition), plus tools and resources

[Buy the print version of the \*Oxford Spanish Dictionary\*](#)

## MG! LOL: Internet Slang Added to Oxford English Dictionary

By [Daniel Ionescu](#), [PCWorld](#) Mar 26, 2011 5:59 AM



Time-saving online abbreviations like LOL, OMG, and IMHO are now part of the official English language. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) announced the addition of several acronyms to its dictionary, adding some interesting trivia behind the origins of these Internet-associated expressions.

OED explained that although "initialisms" like OMG (Oh My God), LOL (Laughing Out Loud) and IMHO (In My Humble/Honest Opinion) are strongly associated with the language of electronic communications, their origins are surprisingly predating the Internet era.

For example, OED found a quotation for OMG in a personal letter from 1917, and EYL (For Your Information) originated in the language of memoranda in 1941. Also, apparently the LOL expression had a previous life, starting in 1960, denoting an elderly woman (Little Old Lady).

OED notes that some expressions like OMG and LOL are used outside electronic communication contexts as well, including print and spoken use, in the form of more than a simple abbreviation:

"The intention is usually to signal an informal, gossipy mode of expression, and perhaps parody the level of unreflective enthusiasm or overstatement that can sometimes appear in online discourse, while at the same time marking oneself as an 'insider' au fait with the forms of expression associated with the latest technology."

If you're not familiar with the online slang, you can always check out this [Internet slang dictionary and translator](#). Just enter the text slang you want to translate and you're done. TTYL

## What is the Historical Thesaurus of the OED

### Christian Kay, professor emeritus, University of Glasgow, and editor of the Historical Thesaurus

The Historical Thesaurus of the *OED* is a unique resource for scholars and lovers of the English language. Rather than organize words alphabetically, as in a dictionary, it organizes them according to their meanings. It also organizes them chronologically, going back to the roots of English in the Anglo-Saxon period, over thirteen hundred years ago. It is thus possible to see how the expression of a concept has developed, whether it be a long-established one, such as *sovereignty*, or a more modern one, like *radio*.

### Compiling the Historical Thesaurus

The Thesaurus was compiled over a period of 44 years in the English language department at the University of Glasgow. It was the brainchild of Professor Michael Samuels, who saw a gap in the materials available for studying the history of the English language. While the *OED* is a hugely rich resource for studying the histories of individual words, there was no parallel resource for studying the history of concepts as they are expressed in words. In 1965 Samuels announced, in a talk to the Philological Society, that his department would undertake the task of producing such a resource; in 2009 the work was published in print as the Historical Thesaurus of the *OED*.

The first step in this mammoth undertaking was to extract the necessary information from the *OED*: the meaning, its dates of use, part of speech, and definition. Since computers were barely on the horizon in humanities research, this task was done in the traditional way, by reading the dictionary and transcribing the information onto paper slips. Over the years, as Oxford University Press published supplements and then a second edition of the *OED*, new information was added or matched to the old. This process is being continued by OUP staff as the *OED's third edition* progresses, thus keeping the Thesaurus up-to-date.

### Carnation to pink

Samuels' contention was that studies of the development of the English vocabulary would be assisted if words could be viewed in the context of other words of similar or related meanings. Thus a student of Shakespeare might notice that the author does not use the colour adjective *pink*. Looking up *pink* in the *OED* shows that it is not recorded in English until after Shakespeare's death, and was therefore not available to him. This information might lead the researcher to wonder whether Shakespeare or earlier writers had other words for the concept at their disposal. Looking up *pink* in the Thesaurus, where the complete range of words meaning *pink* is displayed, reveals several possibilities. One such is *carnation*, first recorded in 1565/78; other words were also available at the time. The *OED* reveals that Shakespeare used *carnation* some 30 years later in *Love's Labour's Lost*. The example demonstrates what a powerful tool the *OED* and Thesaurus make in combination.

Anyone who wants to explore further how pink developed, or how it relates to other colour terms, can return to the Historical Thesaurus and examine the hierarchy in the left-hand panel. Scrolling upwards shows how pink relates to the general concept of colour, while scrolling downwards leads to specific shades of pink, and then to related categories, such as dyestuffs. This example illustrates the classificatory principle on which the Thesaurus is based: a progression from the most general terms to the most specific.

### Classifications in the Historical Thesaurus

Establishing the classification was the second major undertaking for the project. At its very highest level, the Historical Thesaurus has three broad divisions: *The external world*, *The mind*, and *Society*, reflecting the main areas of human activity, as represented in the language of English speakers. Scrolling through *The external world*, we find eight categories at the next level, including *The earth*, *The living world*, and *Sensation*. The living world in turn contains categories at the next level for *Animals*, *Plants*, and *People*, and so on down the hierarchy. It is thus possible to work down through the various levels to reach the names of a particular type of plant or animal, or to go back up the hierarchy to reach the *External world* again. Similar principles apply to *The mind*, which contains sections such as *Mental capacity*, *Emotion*, and *Language*, and to *Society*, which covers activities as diverse as *Warfare*, *Education*, and *Occupation*.

### Social change through language

In addition to providing answers to linguistic questions, the Thesaurus is a rich source of cultural information. The words we use reflect not only how we live, but how we think about the world, and the same is true about the vocabulary of previous generations. A scroll through a section such as *Food* or *Inhabiting/dwelling* illustrates how far people's lives have changed over time. Social and cultural factors may also help to explain why new words enter a language and others drop out of use. The twentieth century, for example, saw the development of a whole

new vocabulary for computing, while many traditional farming terms disappeared as technology developed. It also saw the recognition of new categories of people, such as *teenagers* or *wrinklies*, reflecting an increased focus on age as a social factor. Similar effects can follow political events, such as the Norman Conquest; many new words in categories such as *Law* or *Religion* are first recorded in the decades after 1066, indicating comprehensive changes of practice in these areas.

It is also interesting to look at the sources of words. There are, for instance, large numbers of expressions in English to describe people whom the speaker holds in contempt, such as *whelp* or *muckworm*. The *OED* gives etymological information for each of these words, but a glance at the Thesaurus category *contemptible person* sets off other trains of thought. Many words show contempt by equating human beings with animals, many belong to the slang register, and many are first found in the sixteenth century, a period of great inventiveness in the English language. Many, especially of the latter, have come and gone fairly quickly, as slang words tend to do—partly because they lose their impact, and partly because they may be considered unduly offensive in more sensitive times.

**Jennie Price, Senior Assistant Editor, Oxford English Dictionary New Words Group**

An important part of our work on the New Words side of the OED project is to increase our coverage of vocabulary from the major varieties of world English. We are very fortunate to be able to use as the basis of our research a number of comprehensive regional dictionaries, such as the *Australian National Dictionary*, the *Dictionary of New Zealand English*, the *Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles*, and the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*. Of course we cannot include every word covered in these regional dictionaries, and have to make a decision - as with all new entries - based on the amount of available quotation evidence. Quotations that we find in regional dictionaries are backed up by examples from our Reading Programme, which includes a texts from all over the English-speaking world, as well as newspapers and magazines contributed partly by members of staff in branches of Oxford University Press world-wide. These are further supplemented by suggestions and contributions from interested members of the public and by research in electronic newspaper archives and similar databases.

Many of the resulting words (as well as some of the earliest of this type documented in the first edition of the OED) describe flora and fauna, and it is interesting to see how many words originating in British English have travelled across the seas to be applied to a different species in a new land: compare, for example, the British magpie with the unrelated, but similarly coloured Australian birds of the same name.

Slang words tend to start life quite specific to a certain variety of English, nowadays often subsequently becoming more widely used via film and television. Some regional slang words making their debut in *OED Online* are (from North America) *marble orchard*, a cemetery, (from Australia) *mail*, information, rumour, and (from the U.S. Military) *Maggie's drawers*, 'a red flag used to indicate a miss in target practice'. For U.S. and Australian slang in particular, we have a number of useful dictionaries which we regularly consult to check currency and find new examples. Some curious facts emerge from our research: why, for example, is a linen department in a shop sometimes called a *Manchester department* in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, but not apparently elsewhere?

The most prolific contributor of new vocabulary to the English language is, unsurprisingly, American English. Looking at the update of MARCIATON-MASSYMORE recently published in the New Edition online, we find about 70 entries which are labelled 'U.S.' or 'orig. U.S.', as well as a further ten or so designated chiefly, or wholly 'N. Amer.' in the OED Second Edition. In comparison, the segment of the First Edition of the OED dealing with this range shows us roughly 20 entries for specifically American terms (not all explicitly labelled at this time as such) many of which were cited from the then recently published *Century Dictionary*, or from various editions of *Webster's*. When the OED was originally compiled resources were less abundant and the editors relied heavily on contributions received as a result of their appeal for readers in the 'English-speaking and English-reading public in Great Britain, the Americas, and the British Colonies'. As it turned out, the American readers were eventually set to work on much the same material as those in Britain, and it was left to a few prolific contributors such as Albert Matthews of Boston to provide examples of more specifically American usage.

The only other examples of vocabulary specific to a particular regional English in the First Edition of the OED in this range are a sense of *marrow-pudding* labelled *West Indian*, and Australian uses of *martin* and *Mary*. By contrast, the New Edition online brings us over 30 entries from Australia and New Zealand, Canada, the Caribbean, and South Africa, in addition to those from the United States noted above. This is as much a measure of how these Englishes have grown and settled into very distinctive varieties over the last century as it is of the vast increase in resources available to today's editors of the OED.

**Varieties of English: World English and the OED**

- [toggleThe OED today](#)
- [toggleAspects of English](#)
- [toggleHistorical Thesaurus of the OED](#)
- [toggleHistory of the OED](#)
  - [Dictionary facts](#)
  - [Dictionary milestones](#)
  - [Dictionary editors](#)
  - [Contributors](#)

## The OED today

For well over 100 years that *OED* has told the history of the English language by reporting in detail on individual words. The First Edition of the dictionary (1884-1928) was published in ten (and then—after some rebalancing of the contents—in twelve) volumes. But the language keeps on growing. Each year there are more new words, and more information is discovered about old words.

At present the dictionary is undergoing its first thoroughgoing revision and update. Around 70 editors, mostly in Oxford and New York, review each word in turn, examining its meaning and history, noting where meanings have changed—or where old definitions no longer suffice—and recraft the entries in the light of the most up-to-date information. The result is the current online edition of the dictionary (in progress). The following pages give you some insights into how the editors work and how to 'read' the *OED*.

### Rewriting the *OED*

- **Why revise:** [the revision programme](#)
- **How they do it:** [Collecting the evidence](#)
- **How they do it:** [Sorting of quotations](#)
- **How they do it:** [Editing of entries](#)
- **How they do it:** [Researching the language](#)
- **How they do it:** [Bibliographical standardization](#)
- **Who's involved:** [current and former editorial staff of the \*OED\*](#)
- **Invaluable help from the wider community:** [consultants, advisers, and contributors to the \*OED\*](#)

### A reader's guide to today's *OED*

- Recent updates: the *OED* is updated four times a year. See [the latest revised entries and new words added to the dictionary](#)
- **[Guide to the Third Edition of the \*OED\*](#):** read the Guide to discover how the *OED* works. What is the structure of a dictionary entry? What are the key features of each entry? This Guide provides both basic background and a summary of some more advanced features.
- **[Rewriting the \*OED\*](#):** a step-by-step tour of the revised dictionary, with examples of entries before and after revision, along with a description of what has changed in each case. This is a single pdf file with separate sections for the major types of editorial change.
- **[Preface of the Third Edition of the \*OED\*](#):** there has been a revolution in dictionary practice since the First Edition of the dictionary was published between 1884 and 1928. This Preface looks at how today's editors approach their work: what they are aiming to achieve and the materials they have at their disposal to help them with their work. It finishes by listing a number of 'myths' about the *OED* and about language, which often confound dictionary readers.
- **[The \*OED\* and innovation](#):** a summary of the evolution of the *OED*, from the Victorian period to present day, that shows how visionaries and technology worked together to modernize English lexicography
- **Tools for reading the *OED*:**
  - [Key to symbols and other conventions](#)
  - [Key to the pronunciation](#)
  - [Abbreviations list](#)
  - [Glossary](#)
- **[New video shorts](#):** a series of videos now live examines how the *OED* is produced behind the scenes.