

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

By Simon Winchester

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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.

This audio also includes a conversation between Simon Winchester and John Simpson, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary

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- Sales Rank: #684360 in Books
- Brand: Winchester, Simon/ Winchester, Simon (NRT)
- Published on: 2005
- Released on: 2005-10-04
- Format: Unabridged
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 6
- Dimensions: 5.50" h x 5.00" w x .75" l, .38 pounds
- Running time: 27000 seconds
- Binding: Audio CD
- 6 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com 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*

From Publishers Weekly

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

From School Library Journal

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

themselves well and truly ensconced in the late 19th century.

Susan H. Woodcock, Kings Park Library, Burke, VA

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Lavelle Hildreth:

Have you spare time for a day? What do you do when you have more or little spare time? Yeah, you can choose the suitable activity intended for spend your time. Any person spent their spare time to take a move, shopping, or went to often the Mall. How about open or maybe read a book allowed The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary? Maybe it is being best activity for you. You realize beside you can spend your time with the favorite's book, you can wiser than before. Do you agree with it has the opinion or you have additional opinion?

Dennis Rodriguez:

Reading can called mind hangout, why? Because if you find yourself reading a book specifically book entitled The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary your thoughts will drift away trough every dimension, wandering in every single aspect that maybe unknown for but surely can become your mind friends. Imaging every single word written in a e-book then become one form conclusion and explanation which maybe you never get ahead of. The The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary giving you an additional experience more than blown away your brain but also giving you useful data for your better life in this particular era. So now let us demonstrate the relaxing pattern the following is your body and mind will be pleased when you are finished reading it, like winning a. Do you want to try this extraordinary wasting spare time activity?

Suzanne Mitchell:

In this age globalization it is important to someone to obtain information. The information will make someone to understand the condition of the world. The condition of the world makes the information much easier to share. You can find a lot of references to get information example: internet, classifieds, book, and soon. You will see that now, a lot of publisher in which print many kinds of book. The book that recommended to you is The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary this e-book consist a lot of the information of the condition of this world now. That book was represented just how can the world has grown up. The vocabulary styles that writer make usage of to explain it is easy to understand. Typically the writer made some analysis when he makes this book. Honestly, that is why this book appropriate all of you.

Hoyt Adkins:

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watching TV all day every day. You can have new activity to spend your whole day by studying a book. Ugh, think reading a book can definitely hard because you have to bring the book everywhere? It fine you can have the e-book, getting everywhere you want in your Cell phone. Like The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary which is obtaining the e-book version. So , why not try out this book? Let's notice.

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