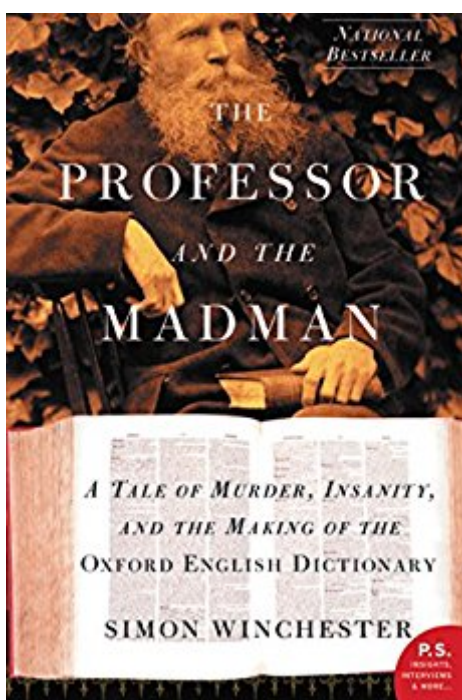


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# The Professor And The Madman: A Tale Of Murder, Insanity, And The Making Of The Oxford English Dictionary



## Synopsis

New York Times Bestseller Simon Winchester's classic about the making of the Oxford English Dictionary is soon to be a major motion picture starring Sean Penn and Mel Gibson. The making of the Oxford English Dictionary was one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken. As definitions were collected, the overseeing committee, led by Professor James Murray, was stunned to discover that one man, Dr. W. C. Minor, had submitted more than ten thousand. But their surprise would pale in comparison to what they were about to discover when the committee insisted on honoring him. For Dr. Minor, an American Civil War veteran, was also an inmate at an asylum for the criminally insane. Masterfully researched and eloquently written, *The Professor and the Madman* is an extraordinary tale of madness, genius, and the incredible obsessions of two remarkable men that led to the making of the Oxford English Dictionary and literary history. "The linguistic detective story of the decade.... Winchester does a superb job of historical research." —William Safire, *New York Times Magazine*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This was the April book for our Library Book Club. Wow! This was a very well written book. I found it to be very interesting and informative. The creation of the Oxford English Dictionary took place before many mental illnesses were officially diagnosed. I found it very interesting that one of the main contributors was a Civil War veteran, Dr. W. C. Minor, a medical doctor who had committed murder and was an inmate at an English asylum for the criminally insane. Today he would probably be diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and treated with medication. Dr. Minor's story is tragic but it is amazing that he was able to turn his madness into brilliance in his contribution to the Oxford English Dictionary. He answered the call when Professor Murray sent out requests for contributors to read several books and contribute page number references to words found in recommended books that should be added to the dictionary. This was a huge undertaking. He loved to read and both he and Professor James Murray were obsessed with creating the Oxford English Dictionary. This is an amazing dictionary and I have used the online version often in my work as a quality assurance coordinator. This is an amazing story and well worth the read.

An absolutely fascinating account of the origins of the largest lexical enterprise in history, the Oxford English Dictionary, as well as the men who initiated it and worked on it. Among the latter, the most interesting was William Minor. An American and a doctor by training, he served in the US Army during the last years of the Civil War when he went through, and participated in, some gruesome events indeed. These events may or may not have triggered his paranoia which caused him to murder an innocent laborer in London, where he moved after the war's end. Whereupon he was judged insane and committed to an asylum for life. It was from his cell, in reality two comfortable rooms, that he made a vast contribution to the Dictionary. The weakest part of the book comes towards the end, There Winchester, speculates--speculates is the right word--about what may have caused Minor's paranoia and mental illness. Comparing the symptoms to those of PTSD, he claims that the latter was first identified during the 1991 Gulf War! A pity, for I would gladly have given his book five stars.

Truth is stranger than fiction and this one is an incredible tale. The Oxford English Dictionary is a remarkable achievement by any standard. The work of many academics and voluntary contributors over many years. None could be stranger than the contributor who consistently provided produced many of the quotes included in the dictionary. Being housed in a mental institution with training and experience as a doctor, this contributor had more time on his hands than most and had collected a

formidable library of classics from the 17th to 19th century. Simon Winchester has done due diligence to the research and facts of this intriguing story and offers sensitivity and insight into an amazing story bound up with the world's most famous dictionary. This is a must read.

When I first picked up a copy of this book and read that it was the history of the writing of the Oxford English Dictionary - well - I thought it might be good for insomnia. Wrong. Fascinating - from the first page to the last. I have recommended this book to many - and each has loved it and shared it with their friends and family. How tragic - the life of "the madman" - and how fascinating that Shakespeare wrote of elephants - not really having a way to now what they were. And what an undertaking! Don't want to give too much away - but suffice to say, this book will engage you, inform you, and will read like an exciting novel. I bought my copy for \$.50 - dug out of my local supermarket's donated books bin. I have since purchased numerous copies as gifts. You won't be disappointed. This book is intriguing.

Winchester's a gifted story teller who writes elegantly. The Professor and the Madman complements the mechanical details of the decades-long construction of the Oxford English Dictionary and the etymology of words with a captivating and sorrowful tale of murder, lunacy, and genteel English manners, mannerisms, and eccentricities to create a highly readable tale. Winchester mixes legend, fact, speculation, inference, and insight in his account of Dr. William Minor, a Yale-educated American Civil War surgeon, who, tormented by mental illness, uses his service weapon to kill a hapless brewery worker in England. Remitted to an asylum for the criminally insane, Dr. Minor has a gentlemanly life by day and a tortured and tormented existence at night. He becomes an invaluable volunteer contributor to the OED, while those responsible for the OED are unaware of his confinement. With its twists, turns, and surprises, the book could have been a mystery novel. Parts of the book drag and seem padded, especially near the end. Though the book includes some charming illustrations, it would have benefited from inclusion of photos, particularly those Winchester describes in the text. Also, Winchester goes overboard with some speculations: If as an early teen Minor had masturbated or fornicated he "might have turned out very differently;" while in the asylum, did Minor have sex with the widow of the man he had killed? But all in all, a highly readable tale well told.

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