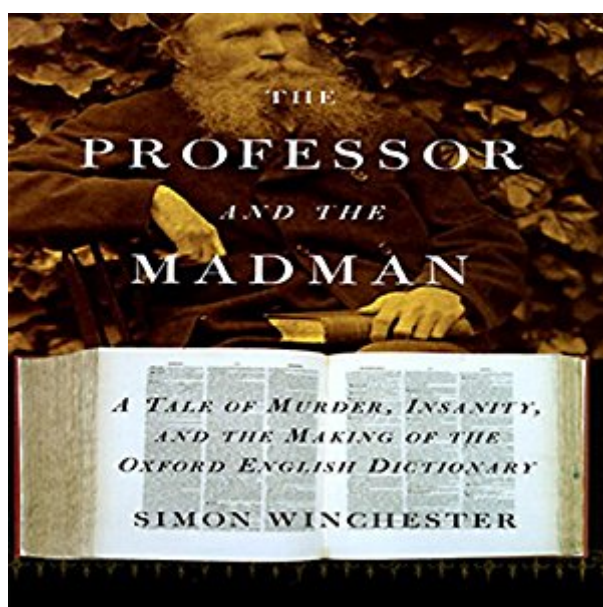


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The Professor And The Madman



Synopsis

National Bestseller! One of the greatest literary achievements in the history of English letters, the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary began in 1857, took seventy years to complete, and drew from tens of thousands of brilliant minds. But hidden within the rituals of its creation is a fascinating and mysterious story. Professor James Murray was the distinguished editor of the OED project. Dr. William Chester Minor, an American surgeon who had served in the Civil War, was one of thousands of contributors to the dictionary. But Minor was no ordinary contributor. He was remarkably prolific, sending thousands of neat, hand-written quotations from his home. On numerous occasions Murray invited Minor to visit Oxford and celebrate his work, but Murray's offer was regularly, mysteriously, refused. Finally, a puzzled Murray set out to visit him. It was then that Murray would finally learn the truth about Minor . . . that, in addition to being a masterly wordsmith, Minor was also a murderer, clinically insane - and locked up in Broadmoor, England's harshest asylum for criminal lunatics. *The Professor and the Madman* is an extraordinary tale of madness and genius, and the incredible obsessions of two men at the heart of the Oxford English Dictionary and literary history. Written with riveting insight and detail, Simon Winchester delivers a fascinating glimpse into one man's tortured mind and his contribution to another man's magnificent dictionary.

--This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

James Murray, the editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, corresponded with Dr. W.C. Minor for many years; Dr. Minor was one of the most indefatigable contributors to the OED. Minor was

committed to an Broadmoor asylum in 1872, having murdered an innocent man. Nowadays we would call him a paranoid schizophrenic; in those days they just called him insane. In the asylum he had plenty of time to locate and submit thousands of usage slips to the OED, and thus began his relationship with Murray. It is an extraordinary relationship, and Winchester wrings every last drop of melodrama from it--to the point of irritating the reader. For example, for many years there was a standard tale about the first meeting of Murray and Minor, in which Murray only finds out when he actually arrives at Broadmoor that Dr. Minor is not on the staff, but is an inmate. Winchester opens the book with the phrase "Popular myth has it that . . ." and proceeds to tell the tale; it is an engaging story, and he tells it well. However, halfway through the book he points out that it is false, and has been known to be so for several years. He does eventually give the true version of events, but dangling the attractive lie in front of the reader like this while delaying the less exciting truth is a sign of his weakness for sensationalism. Another example (p. 195 in the paperback edition): after describing a particular gruesome episode of his madness, Winchester speculates for a whole page about a possible cause for which there is not even a hint of evidence--that Minor had an affair with the wife of the man he murdered. Winchester freely admits this is a complete fabrication, but includes it as "legitimate speculation"; to me, it feels more like tabloid journalism.

For those who love words and reference books, this is a well-told yarn. Being the story of the relationship between one William Minor, a doctor and convicted lunatic suffering from paranoia, and James Murray, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, there is much more right with the book than wrong, but it does have some problems, primarily the lack of an index. Any book with so many names should have an index. Secondly, one wishes to see and hear more -- the author refers to several interesting photographs: a formal farewell photo of Minor near the end of his life, returning to America after 37 years in England (all but one spent in Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane); the last photo of Murray, a fortnight before his death, in the Scriptorium (where the OED was compiled) surrounded by his daughters and staff. It would have been nice to see these pictures. The author refers several times to Minor's handwriting and many times to his letters. It would have added to the story to see at least a few letters in full, and particularly to have seen a sample of Minor's writing. In addition, Winchester credits the motivation for the creation of the OED to an address by Richard Trench, in which Trench delineates seven ways that dictionaries of the time were deficient, but then states that "most of them are technical and should not concern us here"! I think people interested in this book *would* most likely be interested in these technical details. If nothing else, they should be put in a (foot)note.

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