



## The Professor and the Madman

By Simon Winchester  
ISBN: 9780060839789

### Introduction

It is known as one of the greatest literary achievements in the history of English letters. The creation of the Oxford English Dictionary began in 1857, took 70 years to complete, drew from tens of thousands of brilliant minds, and organized the sprawling language into 414,825 precise definitions. But hidden within the rituals of its creation is a fascinating and mysterious story of a friendship -- an account of two remarkable men whose strange 20-year relationship lies at the core of this historic undertaking. Professor James Murray, a former schoolmaster and bank clerk, was the brilliant editor of the OED project. Dr. W. C. Minor, a retired American surgeon who had served in the Civil War, was one of thousands of contributors who submitted illustrative quotations of words to be used in the dictionary. But Minor was no ordinary contributor. Not only was he remarkably prolific, sending in as many as ten thousand definitions, but he was also a murderer, clinically insane, and locked up in Broadmoor, England's 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. With riveting insight and detail, Simon Winchester crafts a fascinating glimpse into one man's tortured mind and his contribution to another man's magnificent dictionary.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Who is Dr. W.C. Minor? How do you first come to know him at the beginning of *The Professor and the Madman*? What role does he play in the "Lambeth Tragedy?"
2. Who is James Murray? How would you characterize his early interest in philology? How does Murray come to work on the Oxford English Dictionary? What was the initial projection of how long the O.E.D. would take to complete?
3. How does Dr. Minor's madness first reveal itself? How do his experiences in Ceylon, at the Battle of the Wilderness, and in Florida relate to his condition? What are some of the symptoms of his illness? How would you describe his personality?
4. What did you think of the elaborate process of creating the Oxford English Dictionary? Was it easy to visualize? Did it surprise you to learn that in the end more than 6 million slips with definitions were submitted by volunteers?
5. How would you describe Dr. Minor's life at the asylum? How did he have access to books? What unusual visitor helped him in this respect? What aspects of his situation at the asylum did you find especially unusual? According to the author, how might Dr. Minor have learned of the creation of the O.E.D.?
6. How does his work on the O.E.D. change Dr. Minor's personality? How does it impact his madness? What are some of the ideas and rumors about Minor that float around the Scriptorium, where the O.E.D. is being written and edited?
7. How does Murray first learn of Dr. Minor's status as a criminally insane asylum inmate? How does Murray eventually come to know Minor? How would you describe their relationship? What aspects of their interaction lead you to this assessment?
8. How does Dr. Minor injure himself while he is at Broadmoor? How did you interpret this act? Do you agree with the author that his dismemberment was an attempt to purge himself of "unsavory" thoughts and deeds? How does the arrival of Dr. Brayn change the living conditions at Broadmoor for Dr. Minor?
9. What elements of this story did you find especially harrowing, fascinating, bewildering, surprising? Did you feel sympathetic toward Dr. Minor? Were you surprised at the strong bond that developed between him and James Murray?

### About the Author

Simon Winchester was a geologist at Oxford and worked in Africa and on offshore oil rigs before becoming a full-time globe-trotting foreign correspondent and writer. He is the author of *Krakatoa*, *The Map that Changed the World*, *The Professor and the Madman*, and *The Fracture Zone*, among many other titles. He currently lives on a small farm in the Berkshires in Massachusetts and in the Western Isles of Scotland.