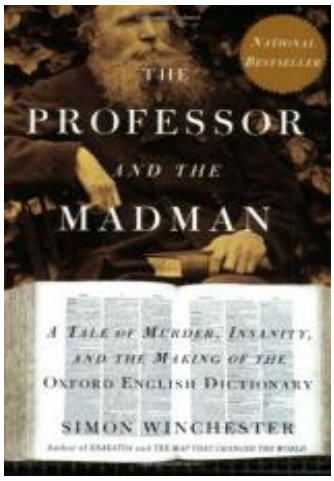
The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of The Oxford English Dictionary

by Simon Winchester



About the Book

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.

Discussion Guide

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?

Author Bio

Simon Winchester was the acclaimed author of many books, including THE PROFESSOR AND THE MADMAN, THE MEN WHO UNITED THE STATES, THE MAP THAT CHANGED THE WORLD, THE MAN WHO LOVED CHINA, A CRACK IN THE EDGE OF THE WORLD and KRAKATOA, all of which were *New York Times* bestsellers and appeared on numerous best and notable lists. In 2006, Winchester was made an officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) by Her Majesty the Queen.

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Publication Date: August 22, 2012
Paperback: 272 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial
ISBN-10: 006099486X
ISBN-13: 9780060994860