

## A Crazy Look at the Oxford English Dictionary

Simon Winchester. The Professor and the Madman. (1998). Harper Collins. 242 pp.

---

**Diane Diamond, language education consultant**

---

At twenty volumes, the current Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is the biggest, most thorough study of English ever published, and the original twelve “tombstone-size” volumes took over 70 years to complete. Making pronouncements on the origins and meanings of hundreds of thousands of words was no simple task, and author Simon Winchester delves into the complicated politics and logistics that made this gargantuan process successful. Along with details about the formation of the dictionary, The Professor and the Madman tells the unlikely story of Dr. James Murray, the editor of the first edition of the OED, and his connection with his prolific contributor, Dr. W.C. Minor, graduate of the Yale Medical School. Dr. Minor was born on the island of Ceylon to American missionaries, and three years later Murray was born in the British Isles, but both men grew up with a love of languages and learning. W. C. Minor is referred to as “the Madman” in the title of the book because he spent over half his life in an asylum for the criminally insane.

The purchase of this book, published by Harper Collins and retailing at \$22, may not produce any direct lesson plan ideas for the teacher of ESOL, but it will offer fascinating background information into the creation of the world’s first complete dictionary of the English language. According to Winchester, when Shakespeare was writing his comedies, tragedies, and sonnets, there was not a complete dictionary of English. The closest thing was a compendium of “hard words” or highbrow books like the Art of Rhetorique. Only a small amount of vocabulary was represented, and this was usually in the form of rare, obsolete, or pretentious words.

The Professor and the Madman chronicles changes in types of dictionary over the centuries. After Shakespeare’s time, the next attempts at compiling English dictionaries did not show the historical and cultural development of the language, as does the OED, but they did try to be fairly comprehensive. When Samuel Johnson was compiling his dictionary, there was much discussion over whether a dictionary should be a

fixed, prescriptive guide or a mutable reference which would reflect the flow and change of language as it was actually used. Johnson's final product encompassed the English lexicon as it had been used over 150 years of English writing, and it was published in two volumes, appearing on April 15, 1755.

In The Professor and the Madman, the reader learns the mind-boggling details involved in publishing a complete dictionary. Volunteer readers would need to supply quotations for each word, and each quotation had to be systematically filed and stored. Each day over 1000 definition slips would arrive, and eventually a building called the Scriptorium was built to house them. Agreements had to be struck with the publisher regarding the size and publication date of each volume.

Hopscotched through the book on the historical development of the OED are chapters unfolding the curious story how Dr. Minor went from being a Civil War surgeon to a convicted murderer. Readers who enjoy a gripping murder mystery will be fascinated with this true tale which played out in Victorian England. Before reading the book, I had guessed that Dr. Minor had been convicted of a crime of jealousy and passion, but the truth is far more bizarre. Ironically, had Minor not been confined for a lifetime to the Broadmoor Special Hospital, he would not have been in a situation to connect with the editor of the OED. Fortunately, the director of the hospital had the compassion and insight to allow Dr. minor the resources to concentrate on his lofty philological research. The doctor was able to have access to books and could fashion a cozy library space. Perhaps he was even able to ignore the barred windows. Coincidentally, the way he was able to procure some of his books had its strangeness, too.

Each of the eleven chapters begins with a mood-setting definition from the OED. For example, only after reading The Professor and the Madman, did I realize that the word 'bedlam' comes from 'bethlem,' which springs from the Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem, referred to in 1402 as "a hospital for lunatics." Further punctuating this thin book are Victorian-style etchings. One gets the feeling that Simon Winchester has a love of words, books, and publishing similar to the subjects of his writing. Some ESOL teachers may hesitate to pay full price for a hard bound book which will not be a part of their lesson planning, but I was able to find a perfect used edition for only half price. Later I chanced upon library volunteers who were featuring the book among their monthly recommendations. It appears there will be opportunities to read The Professor and the Madman even if forking out the retail price is not an option.