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

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

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The Professor and the Madman is ostensibly the story of the inception and creation of the Oxford English Dictionary, the longest and most detailed work in the entire English language. But it is really the story of the strange interactions between two gentleman, a Scotsman, James Murray, who came, through atypical circumstances, to be editor of the Oxford English Dictionary and an American, William Minor, an army surgeon and schizophrenic who committed a murder and helped to write the Oxford English Dictionary from his asylum cell, unbeknownst to Murray and his team for nearly two decades.

The book is full of delightful stories about how the Oxford English Dictionary was conceived; snippets of letters between the two men, their friends, colleagues and families; sketches of the events, and so on. It climaxes with the meeting of the two men and its denouement comes with their deaths and the completion of the Oxford English Dictionary which came years after.

The book contains eleven chapters and a postscript. Chapter 1, "The Dead Night in Lambeth Marsh," tells the story of the murder of an ordinary English pub-worker, George Merrett in Lambeth March by Dr. William Minor, an American doctor living in England to regain his health. Dr. Minor was a paranoid schizophrenic (though no one knew this at the time) and thought that Merrett was an Irishman trying to avenge himself on Minor for branding him with hot iron as a traitor during the Civil War. The murder led to Minor's sensational trial and eventual imprisonment in the Broadmoor Asylum for the Insane near London where he would spent most of the remainder of his life.

Chapter 2, "The Man Who Taught Latin to Cattle" gives this and more background on Dr. Minor, along with Chapter 3, "The Madness of War." The two chapters also introduce James Murray and draws interesting similarities between the two men. Chapter 4, "Gathering Earth's Daughters," discusses Murray's rise within the English Philological Society, and Chapter 5, "The Big Dictionary Conceived," covers the inspiration for the big dictionary.

In Chapter 6, "The Scholar in Cell Block Two," the author explains how Dr. Minor came to contribute to the Oxford English Dictionary and Chapter 7, "Entering the Lists," describes how extensive Dr. Minor's contributions were. Chapter 8, "Annulated, Art, Brick-Tea, Buckwheat," discusses, among other things, correspondences between Murray and Minor and their circumstances during this time.

Chapter 9, "The Meeting of Minds," covers their famous first encounter, while Chapter 10, "The Unkindest Cut," tells the story of Dr. Minor's increasing derangement. Chapter 11, "Then Only the Monuments," discusses the two men's deaths and other historical details, while the postscript explains the important role of George Merrett in the story and the shame that he isn't remembered.

Chapter 1, The Dead of Night in Lambeth Marsh

Chapter 1, The Dead of Night in Lambeth Marsh Summary and Analysis

The chapter begins with the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word murder. The story opens in Lambeth Marsh, a crime-ridden part of Victorian London. It was particularly violent, Dickensian London, "writ large," but few men had guns there in the late 19th century. However, three revolver shots were fired at 2 a.m. Saturday morning, February 17th, 1872. The loud sounds were heard by a constable, Henry Tarrant. His notes gave some of the crime scene details. Tarrant, and two other policemen, Henry Burton and William Ward rushed to the scene where the man was dying. The papers would come to call the event "The Lambeth Tragedy."

Even today Lambeth is not a nice part of town, and the author explains why in some detail, but a century before it was "positively vile," still an undrained marsh. The land was full of poor working class families; the area stunk with the smell of pollution and was outside the police jurisdiction of both London and Westminster. It was a place of "abandon." Yet it attracted respectable men, such as George Merrett, a stoker at the Red Lion Brewery. He and his wife Eliza were immigrants from Wiltshire, Gloucestershire. They were farm laborers and moved to the city for better pay. They had seven children.

One night, someone knocked on Merrett's window to wake him up for his night shift, so he got ready for work and walked outside. His wife had no reason to worry, as this was normal. But on his way, a man started chasing him, carrying a blade and wearing a mask. Merrett began to run and the man shot at him. The third or fourth shot hit Merrett in the neck. Officer Burton reached him first and they took him to St. Thomas's hospital, but he died when he got there. The killer was caught within moments, by Constable Tarrant; the killer immediately confessed. He was cool and collected but after someone else. Someone had broken into his room and he was simply defending himself.

The killer was named William Chester Minor, a thirty-seven year old man, a former army officer and qualified surgeon. He was fairly well-off and lived below his means. Minor was an American from New Haven, Connecticut. The Foreign Officer had to notify the U.S. minister in London, and the killing quickly became an international incident. The British press blamed the Americans for being violent and having a "light estimation" of the worth of human life.

Mr. Minor came to Britain because he was sick and his doctor recommended a quiet place like Britain. He had stayed in an asylum in the United States and was known to have eccentric habits. He had chosen to live in Lambert apparently due to its seediness and was thought to have a "prodigious sexual appetite." But this was not so, it turns out;

his land lady said he was a bit strange and anxious, worried about people breaking in. He was also afraid of the Irish.

But Dr. Minor's illness was not on clear display until the trial. The London Constables already knew he was troubled, as he would constantly complain to them for odd reasons, such as there being an Irish plot to kill him. An asylum employee had watched Dr. Minor for twenty-four nights in an asylum under observation and thought he was clearly "mad." He believed that men sneaked into his room and molested him in the night. He was being punished for an act he was forced to commit in the army; he could only escape his demons in Europe. The court decided he was insane and the jury agreed. He was legally innocent of murder. Thus he was detained in the Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane.

Chapter 2, The Man Who Taught Latin to Cattle

Chapter 2, The Man Who Taught Latin to Cattle Summary and Analysis

The Oxford English Dictionary, consisting of twelve volumes, took seventy years to complete, and was finished in 1928. Five supplements followed and a second edition came out fifty years later. It is still a paragon for language guides in the world. The book defines over five-hundred thousand words and is incredibly heavy. It is full of selected quotations and can demonstrate the full range of characteristics of each and every word.

The quotes would show how words had been used over centuries and explained when they had changed. The project was commissioned in the 1850s but was not profitable, yet many believe the OED is valuable far beyond its price.

The language is often thought arrogant and utilizes the idea of "polite ears"; many see the OED as the bastion of English culture, the final reflection of the greatest of history's empires. The OED has many critics, including those who find it racist and sexist. But whatever one might criticize it for, it is clearly a masterpiece and an awe-inspiring work of scholarship.

The story of the book has two protagonists, Dr. Minor and another. (The author then describes the details of the word "protagonist." A book, Modern English Usage, insists that "protagonist" can only be used in the singular.) The second protagonist is James Augustus Henry Murray; the two men's lives were intertwined in unusual ways. Murray was the most famous editor of the OED.

Murray was born in February 1837 in Hawick at the border with Scotland. He preferred to be ignored, but history cannot allow this. He spent much of his childhood alone and was precocious and serious as a child. He believed that nothing was better than a diligent life and had a great appetite for all sorts of learning, particularly with living links to history. At fourteen he left school for the British Isles and went on archaeological digs. By age seventeen, he was an assistant headmaster in his hometown and at twenty the full headmaster of a local subscription academy.

At twenty-four, Murray married an infant-school music teacher named Maggie Scott. Two years later they had a child named Anna, but she died in infancy. Maggie got tuberculosis soon thereafter. For her health, James had to abandon his intellectual pursuits and move. He became a clerk in a London Bank but continued to study, helping him to deal with Maggie's death. A year later he was engaged to another woman within a year and was married a year later. His new wife, Ada Ruthven, was more of a social

and intellectual equal; they were devoted to each other and had eleven children together.

Murray's interest in words continued, and two of his friends—a Trinity College mathematician named Alexander Ellis and a rude phonetician Henry Sweet (who Henry Higgins from My Fair Lady is based on)—helped him become a professional. The two men made Murray a scholar and a member of the exclusive Philological Society with no university degree.

At the time, Frederick Furnivall, an eccentric clown and flirt, was secretary of the society, but he was brilliant and had many famous friends. He was also a significant figure in Murray's life. Murray's friendship with Furnivall would lead to his becoming editor of the OED; many of their friends were among "the Men Who Counted" and produced many of the great intellectual achievements of their day.

Chapter 3, The Madness of War

Chapter 3, The Madness of War Summary and Analysis

Ceylon is a tropical island on the southern tip of India, today known as Sri Lanka which was, at the time, a place full of sensual temptations of all sorts. William Minor remembered some young girls, for they sent him in a downward spiral into a world of lust, madness and perdition. Minor was born there in June 1834, three years before Murray.

Both Minor and Murray's families were deeply pious. Thomas and Mary Murray were Congregationalists, and quite orthodox; whereas, Eastman and Lucy Minor were more "muscularly evangelical" Congregationalists, like those from the American colonies. The Minors were missionaries in Ceylon and were "first-line" American aristocracy, the family coming to America a mere decade after the Pilgrims.

The Minors set up in Manepay, Ceylon in March 1834, and William was born three months later, Lucy following two years afterward. William had a rugged Indian childhood; his mother died from Tuberculosis when he was three and two years afterward, Eastman Minor took William to Singapore to meet a second wife. He found a woman, Judith Manchester Taylor, a missionary; they courted quickly and were married in 1839. She was energetic as well, and the two learned Singhalese and taught their children. Eastman and Judith have six children of their own, but two of the sons and one daughter die. Lucy died of Tuberculosis at twenty-one years of age.

Manepay had a mission library with many books and the school there was excellent, such that William Minor had an excellent education. At thirteen he admitted that he had many "lascivious thoughts" about the Ceylonese women. His parents sent him to the United States at fourteen to live with his uncle. His sexual passions continued to build, however. William became quite intimate with a young English girl on the boat to the United States. He claimed he never masturbated or had sex with any of these women, however. But he had many feelings of tormented guilt over his thoughts.

In Minor's teenage years, he became unworried by his thoughts and focused on academic life, studying medicine at Yale. He became a doctor of comparative anatomy in 1863, at twenty-nine. He then joined the army to become a surgeon, serving in the Union army. He signed his first contract halfway through the war. Gettysburg was fought four days after he joined up; William read about it and was eager to use his skills but was not sent into the war for six months. There he saw the "full horror" of the war, impressed upon him without warning. Minor found the sight terrible, as he was too gentle for it, and it pushed him over the edge. Something happened in May 1864 during the Battle of the Wilderness.

Minor did not have orders to the Wilderness but went there anyway and saw real fighting. The fighting was horrendous, as the aim was to kill as many Confederate soldiers as possible. It was conducted largely by infantrymen with muskets, armed with the flesh-tearing minie ball. Many were burned to death from the fires these bullets started.

The Irish were also an important part of the battle, with 150,000 Irish on the Union side, and the soldiers of the Irish Brigade fought as bravely as any in the Union Army. The Irish fought for the Union not only to thank the country but to be trained so as to return to Ireland and expel the English. But once the slaves were freed, they lost much of their will and started to run away and desert.

Minor was hit hard by this desertion, as was the war effort generally. When Minor joined, five-thousand men were deserting every month. These men were fearful, spiritless and afraid. The problem with desertion is that its punishment was death which meant that many soldiers were killing members of their own armies or at least imprisoning, flogging or fining them.

Some were even branded; Dr. Minor was forced to brand an Irish deserter. The branding stayed with Minor his entire life. In his mind, the Irishman survived and never forgave him, as he was now branded and could never fight with the Irish nationalist groups at home. When he got home, Minor imagined, he told his Irish friends that Minor was the enemy of the Irish fighting men and that revenge should be taken on him.

After the battle, Minor went to Alexandria to work in a Hospital for Southern slaves that were free. Minor flung himself into his work and aimed for promotions; he eventually became the assistant surgeon general in the U.S. Army. No one knew of his growing madness and many regarded him as among the best surgeons in the country. In 1866, he was given his commission on Governor's Island. He caught Cholera there, apparently from Irish immigrants who died on the island en masse. Minor began to exhibit a certain paranoia and carry a gun and then came to frequent wild bars and brothels, engaging in profound promiscuity. His colleagues were shocked.

In 1867, Minor announced his engagement to a little-known woman who was apparently a dancer or an entertainer, but the girl's mother thought something bad about Minor and made her daughter break the engagement. Minor was bitter and would not discuss the matter. The army was shocked by his behavior and tried to move him to the countryside, demoting him. He was sent to Fort Barrancas, Florida on Pensacola Bay. He became furious with the army and missed the sex he had. He became aggressive and starting painting.

As time progressed, Minor developed suspicions about his fellow soldiers. Eventually he was diagnosed with delusional monomania by a Surgeon Hammond. His life was spiraling out of control and many came to believe he should be institutionalized. He became suicidal and homicidal and decided he should go to an asylum. His family helped him go there to southeast Washington, in an institution that would come to be called St. Elizabeth's. It was run mostly anonymously.

Under observation, Minor continued to have unmanageable fears. His attendants did not think he would ever be cured. He was eventually retired from the army and became a ward of Uncle Sam. In 1871, he was released from the asylum and went to stay with a friend in Manhattan and then went home to New Haven. In October, he left to London to spend a year in Europe to rest. He took money with him, along with his books, easel, watercolors, brushes and his gun.

Chapter 4, Gathering Earth's Daughters

Chapter 4, Gathering Earth's Daughters Summary and Analysis

On Guy Fawkes Day, 1857, Dr. Minor arrived in London and moved into his house in St. James Square, one of the nicest parts of London. In the London Library, Richard Chenevix Trench spoke to the Philological Society. He said God approved of the spread of English as an essential imperial device and for the worldwide growth of Christianity. The idea of the society was to improve upon the understanding of the properly dominant language of the world. Trench also argued that the major dictionaries in existence had major defects.

Four hundred earlier, there was no English dictionary. This made writing a different phenomenon and more inconvenient. There were Latin dictionaries from 1225 on, however. Some Latin-English dictionaries began to appear in the 16th century. In the 17th century, demand for dictionaries increased, particularly for difficult words. But the words in these books were odd and poorly defined. Eventually many wanted a dictionary for the English language in its entirety, particularly as England's power grew and it felt embarrassed for not studying its language as the French, Germans and Italians did. Dictionaries began to improve but were not good enough.

Samuel Johnson wrote A Dictionary of the English Language, which is an important and beautiful dictionary for its day. It represented an important moment in English language. Johnson wanted to maintain the purity of the English language, but the market also prompted him because those who financed him thought dictionaries would sell. Johnson hired six men and decided to make a catalogue of the English language, but Johnson imposed limits, particularly on the beginning of the time period from which they would read. The catalogue was finished in 1750 and then for four years the list of 43,500 words was edited. The work was published in 1755.

The dictionary had some critics, some of whom argued that Johnson put too much of his personality into the work. Many found it unprofessional, but most were just jealous. But the book was widely praised.

Chapter 5, The Big Dictionary Conceived

Chapter 5, The Big Dictionary Conceived Summary and Analysis

Yet the great dictionary writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are not forgotten because of the Oxford English Dictionary, which far surpassed all that came before. The OED would represent the entire English language - every word, nuance, shading of meaning, etc. They called it the "big dictionary." The OED took seventy years to compile—its making began in the London Library on Guy Fawkes Day, 1857.

In the speech, Trench identified various ways in which present dictionaries were lacking in "On Some Deficiencies in Our English Dictionaries." He argued that dictionaries should be histories of the life span of every word and thought these lives should be charted. The idea was revolutionary and no one man could do it; hundreds of unpaid amateurs were needed and the audience was shocked. The democratic appeal of the idea was enormous, particular due to the English preference for liberty over the Middle European preference for rules.

Twenty-two years passed before the idea got off the ground, however. Great enthusiasm followed the speech, but the plan came long before. Furnivall produced a circular calling for volunteers who could choose a period of history in which they would like to read books. They would write to the society to offer their help and look for words in a painstaking process. Six million slips of paper came in from volunteers - the numbers were far vaster than anyone ever thought. The slips had to be organized, checked and edited. Furnivall eventually lost his energy and the volunteers lost enthusiasm as a result. The process seemed impossible.

James Murray would not let the idea die, however. Furnivall did not have the personal qualities for it; instead, Murray would be editor, and Oxford University Press would publish the book. Some worried that Murray did not look hard enough for quotations for his words. Oxford was hard to persuade but eventually came around. On April 26th, 1878, Murray was invited to Oxford to speak with the Oxford delegates. It turns out they liked each other and Murray was made editor. Murray then erected an iron shed he called the Scriptorium and published an appeal to the English people, which quickly circulated.

A copy of the book found its way to William Minor in the 1880s in the Broadmoor Insane Asylum. Though Minor was insane, he was still an intelligent man in want of something to do. The invitation from Murray was something to do and a method of personal redemption. He sent a letter from the Asylum but the return address looked perfectly normal. The term "asylum" did not have the context it does today.

Chapter 6, The Scholar in Cell Block Two

Chapter 6, The Scholar in Cell Block Two Summary and Analysis

When Minor reached Broadmoor he came to an unusual Victorian building. He was searched and taken to Surrey. He was taken to admissions in Block 4 and became an inmate. The home was new, however, having been open for only nine years. But it was still a prison. Minor was eventually housed in Block 2, a fairly comfortable wing kept for parole patients.

Minor was made comfortable due to his upbringing. He had two rooms which were unlocked. Many wrote from outside to make sure he was being well looked after. He was also able to paint. He had money and could buy books; he even had his books from New Haven sent over and shelves built for them. He lived a life of perfect leisure and security.

Minor was always thought to be insane and his delusions became worse over the years; he could live nowhere else. The author then reviews case notes on Minor that demonstrate this. Electroshock therapy was applied to him in 1878, which was brutal. Yet he also developed a more scholarly side and remained intelligent. He also came to regard the asylum as his home.

As time passed, Minor became genuinely sorry for his crime and wanted to make amends. He wrote to his victim's widow and raised funds for her following the tragedy. The letter worked a small miracle, and Mrs. Merrett wanted to see him; it went well and she began to make monthly visits. They were never real friends but she did agree to bring him books.

Eliza was barely literate, however, but she delivered packages anyway. The practice only lasted a few months, however, because Eliza became an alcoholic. But the process brought about Minor's running across Murray's invitation. Minor was excited when he ran across it and quickly wrote to Murray. It is not clear when this occurred; Murray never picked up on where he was. Murray replied to Minor's inquiry and wanted him to start reading immediately. Murray sent along paper for a formal agreement.

Chapter 7, Entering the Lists

Chapter 7, Entering the Lists Summary and Analysis

Murray' instructions were detailed, but Minor was overjoyed that the rules were even sent to him. This was to him a token of forgiveness of which Eliza's visits gave him an inkling. He would be a scholar again and became happy. Minor would now have to be quite focused on his reading and Murray's notes aided him in this. Every word was a possible "catchword." Murray wanted as many quotes as he could get for the words to capture subtle variations in them.

Many readers could not follow the directions, but Minor could. And Minor wanted to do even more than Murray asked, trying to serve the project however he could. Minor's first book was Complete Woman and had lots of obscure and exotic words. Minor then developed a routine by which he would read every word, line-by-line, writing down anything of interest.

Minor had great accuracy and an eye for detail; many came to admire him for his meticulousness. The author then gives an example of this—Minor's writing about the word "buffoon." He probably took months to complete his first word list, maybe into 1883. He wrote new word lists for every book, each book taking him around three months to complete. He worked every day indexing. The author then describes the books Minor read and how he accumulated a vast number of word lists.

When Minor's first letter arrived, Murray and his team realized that if they found a word giving them problems, they could just send it to Minor and he would take care of it. They would always receive help and could even be pasted onto a page for the printers. The first word to be tried in this way was "art."

Chapter 8, Annulated, Art, Brick-Tea, Buckwheat

Chapter 8, Annulated, Art, Brick-Tea, Buckwheat Summary and Analysis

William Minor's first slip of paper left Broadmoor in the spring of 1885, and by the end of the summer they arrive in brown paper packets each month. The paper slips would flood into Murray's office in Oxford, where he and his team had just moved. Murray's life as editor was difficult, and he threatened to resign on various occasions due to the Delegates' interference, the slow work pace, and his suffering health. One thing that kept him going was the publication of the first installment on January 29th, 1884, 352 pages of A - Ant. Murray believed that he would be finished within eleven years, but it would take forty-four more.

In four decades time, 352 pages would become 15,487. All of Murray's future work was done in his Scriptorium, which survives to this day. The author describes the Scriptorium; it was made out of corrugated iron and was more or less a sanctuary for Murray's work. Murray's men would deliver the slips, and he would meticulously organize them into sub-groups, much like a general on a battlefield.

Defining words is particularly difficult; Murray had to follow various important rules of classification. The envelope of quotations must be properly applied and analyzed. The subgroups had to be chronologically organized and then further sub-divided accordingly to additional criteria. After organizing the quotes, Murray had to write an elegant definition, which he did so well as to impress the world over. The task was painstaking. Eventually Minor had so much trouble with the word "art" that the team sent it to Dr. Minor. The word had sixteen shades of meaning. Minor replied with twenty-seven sentences containing all the shades of meaning of art that Murray could use.

It would be seven years until they met. During that time, Minor sent his quotations in at more than a hundred strips a week. The author then turns to describe the correspondence between Minor and Murray. Most of their communications were stilted and formal, but from time to time Minor would subtly seek affirmation from Murray that his work was helpful. Murray seems dimly aware of his tone.

William Minor continued to grow more insane. He became convinced that someone was vandalizing his books and constantly accused people of this. The author records several of his notes from the time. Yet the words continued to fly out from him. The only variation in his pattern that the Oxford team noticed was that his word stream slowed during the high summer months when Minor liked to spend time outside in the heat.

It is hard to make clear how profound Minor's speed was but because unlike the entries of others, all his entries proved to be useful, his contribution far exceeds that of anyone

else's. The Oxford team was so grateful they thanked him when they completed volume, A-B, which was finished in 1888. But Murray and his team became increasingly puzzled by Minor, as they knew nothing about him. Murray's interest was piqued when he ran across a Crowthorne doctor who spoke of "poor Dr. Minor." Murray and his team were shocked, having no idea about what the doctor was talking.

Chapter 9, The Meeting of Minds

Chapter 9, The Meeting of Minds Summary and Analysis

There was a great dictionary dinner held by the Oxford group on October 12th, 1897; it was unclear why Minor did not attend. The dictionary was going well and publication was accelerating. The publication of the dictionary acquired a kind of special aura because of its profundity.

The Queen rewarded the team with a royal dinner; the author lists the guests. Some of the volunteers were invited and two of the men, both Americans, who were former soldiers and insane, did not come. The first was Dr. Fitzedward Hall, the second Dr. Minor. Those at dinner knew why Hall didn't come because the man was a hermit. But where was Dr. Minor?

Murray was perplexed and irritated and resolved to meet Dr. Minor. He sent Minor a note asking to meet him and Dr. Minor said he would be happy to receive him and did not explain why he had not visited before. On a November Wednesday, Murray traveled to meet him; the trip took a bit over an hour.

A coachman was waiting for him when he arrived and took him to Broadmoor. Upon reaching Broadmoor, Murray comes upon the superintendent of Broadmoor, thinking him to be Dr. Minor. But the superintendent informs him that Dr. Minor is a patient there and is quite insane. Murray was apparently amazed and then filled with interest.

The story of their meeting is fiction, unfortunately, invented by a journalist twenty years later. The story was written to get headlines; it went over well in the United States, but not in London. The editor of the OED in 1915, Henry Bradley, was unhappy, and wrote to the Daily Telegraph, maintaining that the story was a fiction. But the journalist Hayden Church's account cannot be ignored. The truth can be found in a letter Murray wrote in 1902, describing the meeting; and it is only a bit less sensational than the popular story.

In Murray's account, he covers a bit of Minor's history, including his time in the Civil War and the murder. The meeting occurred in January 1891, and the two men saw each other regularly for twenty years from that time; they became good friends. Both men were quite similar in appearance, including their faces and beards, although Dr. Minor looked more unkempt. They both liked each other, Murray becoming sensitive to Minor's moods. They shared books and magazines, but mostly spoke about words.

Few letters between Murray and Minor survive, however; one letter covers a discussion about the word "chaloner." Murray apparently talks about Minor often and his impression of him only increased as time progressed. But their correspondence waned. Dr. Nicholson, who took such good care of Dr. Minor, retired in 1895 and was replaced

by the stricter Dr. Brayn, a "jailor of the old school." Many fear and loath him, including Dr. Murray. And Minor's paranoia remains unchanged.

The next subsection discusses the small indication that Minor was put on suicide watch after the asylum received word that two of his siblings had killed themselves. He also applied to be released into the nearby vicinity but his request was denied due to his unsound mind. He was continually unhappy and Murray notes that the slips were becoming more depressing. After Queen Victoria dies, his submissions ended.

Minor was a patient at Broadmoor for thirty years, the longest-staying patient. His books alone kept him going, as he was mired in depression. His missed Dr. Nicholson and felt harassed by Dr. Brayn. Dr. Hall died in 1901, and a physician friend of Murray's, Dr. Brown, thought he might intervene. Dr. Brown was a doctor in Boston and wrote to the American Embassy in London to secure Minor's release and return to the United States. But Brayn made no recommendation to the Home Secretary; Minor stayed at Broadmoor until he erupted.

Chapter 10, The Unkindest Cut

Chapter 10, The Unkindest Cut Summary and Analysis

Minor sent a note to the Broadmoor staff on December 3rd, 1902, scrawled quickly. Minor has cut his penis off with a string. Apparently Minor had been planning it for days and saw it as a religious, redemptive act. Minor was the son of zealous missionaries and grew up with a sexual guilt complex despite losing his religion. He was a fan of Victorian biologist and philosophy T. H. Huxley, who coined the word agnostic. He thought that God did not exist but his hostility to religion faded over time.

James Murray was a strong Christian and influenced him towards returning to the faith. Murray probably re-triggered Minor's religious thinking, pushing him towards deism. But he judged himself according to his conception of an impartial, all-seeing, constantly vindictive entity. Minor obsessively masturbated and feared God's punishment. His sexual appetites became a horror to him, and so he decided to surgically remove his penis with his pen knife.

Afterward he was placed in the asylum infirmary, spending a month there. The penis stump healed and he could urinate through it but he could not use it sexually. The Deity would be satisfied. Another reason he may have carried out the act was because of his guilt over the relationship with and sexual thoughts about the wife of the man he killed, Eliza Merrett, although there is no indication of this.

A year following the event some started to discuss sending Minor home to the United States. Brayn was somewhat more receptive. A year after that Murray still visited but was distressed by Minor's appearance. He wanted Minor to be able to travel home to die. Minor repaid the favor by giving Murray money to travel to South Africa for a conference.

As time progressed, Minor moved from insane to infirm, hurting himself on various occasions. The author then mentions other "dispiriting developments." In 1910, Brayn ordered all of Minor's privileges to be removed, pulling him away from his books, his two rooms, his writing, flutes, and so on. The author speculates that Brayn was jealous of Minor's stature.

James and his wife Ada (now Sir and Lady) demanded Minor be allowed to return home, and Minor's brother Alfred sailed to London in late March 1910 to pick up Minor. Winston Churchill, then home secretary of his day, allowed Minor to be sent home. Murray then said goodbye to his friend, and Minor was happy to be returning home. Murray and Minor's other friends said their goodbyes and Minor and his brother set sail for the United States. Two weeks later they reached home safely.

Chapter 11, Then Only the Monuments, Postscript

Chapter 11, Then Only the Monuments, Postscript Summary and Analysis

Summary: Of the great men who started the OED project, Furnivall was the first to die in 1910. Murray was advancing in years as well and expected himself to die soon thereafter. Murray hoped the OED would be finished on his eightieth birthday but it did not happen. Nor did Murray live to his eightieth birthday. He died on July 26th, 1915.

At this time, Minor was in a Washington D. C. insane asylum. The day Murray died, Minor hit one of the fellow patients but could not hurt anyone, as he was too weak. Minor was not dangerous and was allowed to walk the countryside, but his delusions became worse, thinking his eyes were always being pecked out by birds.

Minor was finally diagnosed with "dementia praecox," which meant "early-flowering failure of the mental powers," where someone begins to lose contact with reality early in life rather than later, as with senility. Minor's condition was thought to be largely physical, and was classified in 1899 by a German psychiatrist, Emil Kraepelin.

Today Minor's illness is known as schizophrenia. At the time the treatments involved large doses of sedatives, far more than what would be given today, but there have still been only a few important advances. We still do not know what causes schizophrenia or what triggered it in Dr. Minor. Perhaps it was The Battle of the Wilderness or branding the Irishman. No one really knows. It is also unclear as to whether it is ethical to confine those with mental disorders in this way.

The illness may involve a genetic disposition, particularly to respond poorly to stress. It may be tied to post-traumatic stress disorder. Sadly, had Minor been treated according to the standards of his day, he probably could not have completed his dictionary work. The slips were his medication.

In November 1915, Minor wrote to Lady Murray to offer her all the books Murray had lent him during his life; those books remain in Murray's library to this day. But Minor was steadily fading at this time. Senility and dementia increased, but from time to time he had moments of clarity.

In 1919 Minor was released into the custody of his nephew Edward Minor to be taken to a hospital for the elderly insane a few months after which he was released to his nephew's mansion. He liked his new home and some of his mental power came back, but there was no coming back. He died of pneumonia March 26th, 1920. There was no obituary.

The OED was finished within the next eight years; the announcement was made on New Year's Eve, 1927. Americans loved the story of how it was made. The OED has twelve volumes, with 414,825 words defined and 1,827,306 illustrative quotations to which Minor added thousands. The length of type is 178 miles and it has a character count of 227,779,589. It was the greatest effort since printing was invented. The only word ever lost was "bondmaid." Future editions came out as did other supplements. Computer technology allows for a dramatic increase in ease of update.

In the postscript, the author notes that Minor would never have been in a position to contribute to the OED had he not killed George Merrett. The family was left with Eliza as mother and seven children in poverty. London was horrified by the killing and funds were raised to help the widow and her children. Merrett was a member of the Ancient Order of Foresters and so his family was provided a pension from them. The Foresters also gave him a grand funeral procession. His grave is no longer marked.

Minor made sure the family was well looked-after financially. Minor's gravestone is small, located in a New Haven cemetery, surrounded by trash and slums. Merrett has nothing at all; George Merrett has been left unsung. This book is offered as a testament to George Merrett of Wiltshire and Lambeth, without whose death the story could not have occurred.

Characters

Dr. William Minor

William Chestor Minor lived from 1834 to 1920; he was an American Army surgeon and schizophrenic who committed a murder during a paranoid delusion which led to his being confined to the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. While in the Asylum, Minor made innumerable contributions to the Oxford English Dictionary.

Minor was born in Ceylon, or what is now known as Sri Lanka; he was the child of missionaries from New England, who were Congregationalists. He grew up with strong sexual appetites over which he had incredible guilt. He returned to the United States for higher education and entered medical school at Yale and finished school in the middle of the Civil War and joined the Union Army.

While in the army, he served in the Battle of the Wilderness, which had a profound, traumatic emotional impact on him. He was also forced to brand fugitive soldiers, one of whom was an Irishman over whom he felt such guilt that delusions of Irishmen chasing him plagued him most of his life.

After the war ended, Minor's behavior became increasingly erratic; he eventually had to be discharged and take retirement. He then traveled to England to live in the slum of Lambeth in London and followed his sexual passions. During one of his Irishman delusions, he shot and killed George Merrett. After a sensational trial, Minor was declared insane and imprisoned at Broadmoor for most of his remaining years.

When Minor heard about the call for volunteers for the Oxford English Dictionary, he took up the offer and devoted his life to that work, making him one of the most effective volunteers. He would later become good friends with the other major protagonist of the book, James Murray.

James Murray

James Augustus Henry Murray lived from 1837 to 1915. He was a Scottish philologist and a lexicographer of great note, serving as the editor of the Oxford English Dictionary for nearly forty years. During this time, he would fruitfully benefit from the contributions of William Minor.

Murray was born in Denholm on the Scottish Borders; he was a gifted child and loved to learn, leaving home at fourteen to pursue scholarship. At seventeen he became a teacher and in three years headmaster of a local school. James married but his wife Maggie and daughter Ana die of tuberculosis within two years. The family move before Maggie and Ana died, and Murray took a job with the Bank of India, which gave him time to pursue academic interests. A year after Maggie's death, Murray married Ada Agnes Ruthven.

Murray developed a strong interest in etymology and various languages, especially the English language. A friend of his with similar interests got him into the London Philological Society, after which he published The Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland, which enhanced his reputation. Murray proposed the idea of the Oxford English Dictionary to the Delegates of the Oxford University Press. The project required a man as focused and meticulous as Murray and he gained a formal agreement.

During his time as editor, he benefits from Minor's contributions; after seventeen years of correspondence, he eventually meets Minor in the Broadmoor Lunatic Asylum; the two men become good friends for the remainder of Murray's life, and Murray took up the task of making sure Minor was well taken care of.

George Merrett

George Merrett was a young pub-worker in Lambeth Marsh who was shot and killed by William Minor, precipitating the main events of the book.

Eliza Merrett

Merrett's wife, who Minor reached out to after George's death. The two were never quite friends, but Eliza often brought his books. The author speculates that Minor's guilt over being attracted to her led him to cut off his penis later in life.

The London Philological Society

A learned society in Great Britain, among the oldest, devoted to the study of the English Language. It also was responsible for bringing together the idea for the Oxford English Dictionary.

The Irishman

Minor branded an Irish deserter during the Civil War. Minor was haunted by delusions of the Irishman and his friends seeking revenge on him for much of the rest of his life.

Frederick Furnivall

Secretary of the London Philological Society, Furnivall was responsible for getting Murray his editorship.

Dr. Richard Trench

The member of the London Philological society who first proposed the idea of the Oxford English Dictionary, twenty-two years before work on it began.

Dr. Nicholson

The first manager of Broadmoor who took good care of Minor during his stay there, giving him a wide range of privileges.

Dr. Brayn

Dr. Nicholson's replacements, a rather harsh man, who restricted Minor's activities and fought to prevent him from being released and returned to the United States.

William Minor's Family

Minor's family in New England was one of the oldest and most aristocratic New England families in the United States.

Objects/Places

Lambeth Marsh

Today, Lambeth is a slum in London, but in the 19th century it was even worse-off, still an undrained swamp. Minor and Merrett lived in Lambeth; it is where Minor killed Merrett.

Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum

The lunatic asylum where Minor was imprisoned for several decades.

Ceylon

Now Sri Lanka, it was the island where Minor grew up with his missionary parents and where his sexual fantasies began, prompted by beautiful Ceylonese women.

Oxford

The famed college in London where Oxford University Press is located and Murray put together most of the OED.

The Scriptorium

Murray's famous iron corrugated shed where he organized the entries for the OED and wrote the definitions.

Minor's Cell

Minor had a two-room cell at Broadmoor where he wrote his contributions to the OED.

Schizophrenia

No one knew what made Minor mad, but it appears to have been schizophrenia.

The Big Dictionary

The original name of the Oxford English Dictionary.

Slips

The cards on which the quotations Minor provided for words were recorded.

Early Dictionaries

A variety of English dictionaries had been compiled before the OED, but none could compare in scope, length and impartiality to the OED.

The American Civil War, The Battle of the Wilderness

Minor was an army surgeon with the Union Army during the American Civil War. His first battle was the Battle of the Wilderness, the sheer carnage of which scarred him for life psychologically.

Lascivious Thoughts

Minor's "lascivious thoughts" led him to engage in extended sexual activities in seedier parts of New England and London and produced profound guilt in him after Murray led him back to belief in God.

Minor's Penis

Out of guilt and madness, Minor surgically removed his own penis to assuage his sexual guilt.

Words

Murray and Minor became great friends later in life, and one of their favorite conversations was the subject of words.

Themes

Odd Connections

One of the first themes in The Professor and the Madman is the theme of odd connections. The lives of James Murray and William Minor are intertwined in a particularly unusual fashion. For instance, Minor and Murray are both the children of missionaries who lived abroad; they lived in basically the same time period, and despite Murray and Minor being Scottish and American respectively, both ended up in London. Both had independent interests in lexicography despite different educations and nationalities.

But what was most unusual about their connection is first, that Minor came upon Murray's public invitation for volunteers to the Oxford English Dictionary, that he wanted to reply, that he was sane enough to reply and that he made an enormous number of contributions. Second, what is more amazing is that Murray never inquired as to who Minor was or where he was located and was completely unaware of Minor, though Minor had a very public and sensational trial and Murray lived in London during that period.

Odder still is Murray's surprise upon meeting Minor in what were only minutes before unknown to him as a criminal lunatic asylum. Minor was in the unusual position of lenient treatment and Murray reacted in an unusual way, befriending him despite his murderous past and insanity, and caring for him as his condition worsened.

Another odd connection in the book is the connection between Eliza Merrett and William Minor; despite having killed Merrett's husband, Eliza not only spends time with him but goes out of her way to bring him books. Apparently one reason Minor may have removed his own penis is out of guilt over being attracted to the wife of the man he killed.

Guilt and Redemption

William Minor's life was rife with guilt. From an early age he had strong sexual urges, which first manifested themselves as strong attractions to Ceylonese girls when he was a teenager. At the time, he was a Christian whose parents were ardent missionaries to Ceylon. He developed a guilt complex here. When he left the Civil War, he quickly got involved in a variety of intense and frequent sexual encounters with prostitutes and any other women that would have him until he was discharged from the army. And in England, despite his means, he moved into an apartment in Lambeth Marsh, to take advantage of its seedier sexual establishments.

Minor's guilt over killing George Merrett was always with him. He went out of his way to financially provide for Merrett's widow, Eliza, and his contributions to the Oxford English

Dictionary were described by the author as attempts to contribute positively to society and history in order to redeem himself.

In the asylum (and perhaps before), Minor compulsively masturbated. Further, he may have been strongly attracted to Eliza Merrett, the widow of his victim, George Merrett. James Murray led Minor back to a belief in God, which he had lost through reading philosopher T. H. Huxley. But Minor did not become a Christian and so had no opportunity to come to believe in a loving, redemptive God. Instead, his deist God was an unforgiving, ruthless God who demanded perfect moral behavior. He felt such intense guilt due to his past sexual actions that he constantly sought redemption. As his mental condition deteriorated, Minor began to develop a plan to cut off his penis; he was successful.

Mental Illness

Among the most important themes of The Professor and the Madman is that of mental illness. William Minor was a clearly deranged man; his early life seemed that of a responsible and intelligent doctor, but Minor's experience in the Civil War appeared to have taken its toll on him. The author speculates that it caused him such intense psychological trauma that it activated a disposition towards schizophrenia, which is often activated by a traumatic life event.

From the Civil War forward, Minor became increasingly unstable; his sex drive increased and he engaged in more risky sexual behavior (something ostensibly caused by his mental illness). He also began to have paranoid delusions, particularly of Irishmen hunting him down and trying to poison him in his sleep, which presumably arose out of guilt of his branding an Irish deserter during the Civil War.

His delusions finally manifested in the murder of George Merrett; his time at the Broadmoor Asylum saw no permanent abatement or even reduction in the severity of his condition. In fact, as time progressed after the seventeen years he contributed to the Oxford English Dictionary, his condition quickly worsened such that he was no longer able to contribute. In fact, during this time he became so insane and racked with guilt that he surgically removed his own penis.

One of the points the author makes in the book is that while it was tragic that no one understood his illness at the time, had he been put on the early medications for schizophrenia (which he presumably had, for the paranoid variety) or the early surgical treatments (i.e., barbaric lobotomies) for the condition, he would have been unable to contribute as he did to the Oxford English Dictionary.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of The Professor and the Madman combines the perspectives of a mystery novelist, historian and lexicographer. Simon Winchester is a British journalist and an author who spends his time between the United States and Scotland. He wrote for the Guardian as a foreign correspondent for twenty years, and also during the time he wrote numerous books that were of interest to him.

Since he is a journalist, he knows how to make the text interesting to the reader and writes with excitement, giving off the perspective of a mystery novelist, particularly due to how he organizes the book around suspense points. Winchester is not a professional historian but knows how to give careful attention to detail and to clearly employ reliable sources of information. Finally, apparently for the book Winchester acquired some interest in the study of words, lexicography specifically, since the book often discusses the details of words in some detail.

If one is looking for biases in the text, it is hard to find any. If anything, the author's greatest bias is expressed in his assessment of the characters. Despite Minor's obsessions, insanity, and history of murder, Winchester expresses a deep compassion for him; he also expresses sadness that George Merrett, who plays a pivotal role in the story, is not better remembered. Beyond this, however, there is little political, religious or ideological bias to be found in the text.

Tone

The tone of The Professor and the Madman, like the perspective, combines the elements of a mystery novelist, historian and lexicographer and their respective tones. On the one hand, the author, Simon Winchester, is clearly fascinated by the story of the interaction between William Minor and James Murray. He starts the book off with a teaser and seems constantly fascinated not only by the men as individuals but of the lore surrounding their interactions, correspondence and eventual long-time friendship. He hides various details of the story, only to come upon them later with a series of surprises.

Yet The Professor and the Madman is written with the tone of a historian. Winchester records the important facts of the book in detail, while often avoiding repeating factoids in a mundane way. He is trying to give an accurate picture of the events that transpired between the two men, which he regards as only somewhat less fantastic than the legends that sprouted up around them.

Finally, since The Professor and the Madman is set against the backdrop of the creation of the greatest dictionary in history, the Oxford English Dictionary, the author often discusses the meanings of words and opens every chapter with the OED definition of a

word that is relevant to the chapter. As a result, the book often takes a turn into lexicographical remarks and etymological discussions; they are, all things considered, still in keeping with the fascination expressed throughout the book.

Structure

The Professor and the Madman is a short book at 226 pages of text; it contains eleven chapters and a post script. A summary of these chapters is as follows. Chapter 1, "The Dead Night in Lambeth Marsh," the reader is introduced to a English pub-worker, George Merrett, who works in Lambeth March; he is murdered by Dr. William Minor, an American living in England for health reasons who is a surgeon.

Dr. Minor, it is later discovered, is a paranoid schizophrenic; he killed Merrett because he believes him to be an Irishman (or a cohort of this Irishman) attempting to take his revenge on Minor for branding him a traitor with a hot iron in the Civil War. Minor is quickly captured, and his trial is sensational; he was eventually imprisoned in Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum near London; he spent over thirty years there.

Chapter 2, "The Man Who Taught Latin to Cattle" and Chapter 3, "The Madness of War" explain the details of the story and gives much history of Minor's life before that. James Murray, the other major protagonist, is introduced in these chapters as well. The author uses the two men's lives to draw important similarities between them. Chapter 4, "Gathering Earth's Daughters," covers Murray's early career, his membership in the London Philological Society, and his increasing prominence within that group. Chapter 5, "The Big Dictionary Conceived," tells the story of how the Oxford English Dictionary was conceived.

Chapter 6, "The Scholar in Cell Block Two," shows how William Minor discovered Murray's call for volunteers and how he came to contribution to the Oxford English Dictionary; Chapter 7, "Entering the Lists," outlines Minor's impressive contributions. In Chapter 8, "Annulated, Art, Brick-Tea, Buckwheat," the author discusses communications between Murray and Minor and their circumstances during this time.

In Chapter 9, "The Meeting of Minds," Minor and Murray meet, while in Chapter 10, "The Unkindest Cut," the reader encounters Minor's increasing insanity. Chapter 11, "Then Only the Monuments," overviews the two men's deaths and other historical details; the postscript explains the importance of George Merrett and the tragedy of his being forgotten.

Quotes

"Murder ... the most heinous kind of criminal homicide; also, an instance of this." (Chapter 1, The Dead of Night in Lambeth Marsh, 2)

"It was a man. ... You do not suppose I would be so cowardly as to shoot a woman!" (Chapter 1, The Dead of Night in Lambeth Marsh, 12)

"Dr. William C. Minor, surgeon-captain, U.S. Army, a forlornly proud figure from one of the oldest and best-regarded families of New England, was henceforward to be formally designated in Britain by Broadmoor File Number 742, and to be held in permanent custody as a 'certified criminal lunatic.'" (Chapter 1, The Dead of Night in Lambeth Marsh, 21)

"There are many such critics, and with the book being such a large and immobile target there will no doubt be many more." (Chapter 2, The Man Who Taught Latin to Cattle, 27)

"I am a nobody. Treat me as a solar myth, or an echo, or an irrationality quantity, or ignore me altogether." (Chapter 2, The Man Who Taught Latin to Cattle, 32)

"The monomania is now decidedly suicidal and homicidal. Doctor Minor has expressed willingness to go to the Asylum, and has said he hoped he would be permitted to go without a guard, which I think he is now fully capable of doing." (Chapter 3, The Madness of War, 70)

"The 'English dictionary,' in the sense that we commonly use the phrase today—as an alphabetically arranged list of English words, together with an explanation of their meanings—is a relatively new invention. Four hundred years ago there was no such convenience available on any English bookshelf." (Chapter 4, Gathering Earth's Daughters, 80)

"I am not yet so lost in lexicography as to forget that words are the daughters of earth and that things are the sons of heaven." (Chapter 4, Gathering Earth's Daughters, 99)

"In the end more than six million slips of paper came in from the volunteers ... They were marching blindfolded through molasses." (Chapter 5, The Big Dictionary Conceived, 109)

"I never gave a thought to who Minor might be." (Chapter 6, The Scholar in Cell Block Two, 130)

"'Art' was to be his first test." (Chapter 7, Entering the Lists, 144)

"Here, at last, was the first morsel of substance: part one of A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, Founded Mainly on the Materials Collected by the Philological Society, edited by James A. H. Murray, LL.D., Sometime President of the Philological

Society, with the Assistance of Many Scholars and Men of Science." (Chapter 8, Annulated, Art, Brick-Tea, Buckwheat, 147)

"You and I have now known each other through correspondence for fully seventeen years, and it is a sad fact that we have never met. ... I have long wanted to meet you, and may I perhaps suggest that I come to visit you. If this is convenient, perhaps you might suggest a day and a train, and if convenient for me I will telegraph the time of my expected arrival." (Chapter 9, The Meeting of Minds, 168)

"'I regret nor, sir. I cannot lay claim to that distinction. I am the Superintendent of the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. Dr. Minor is an American, and he is one of our longest-staying inmates. He committed a murder. He is quite insane.'" (Chapter 9, The Meeting of Minds, 171)

"So enormous have been Dr. Minor's contributions during the past 17 or 18 years, that we could easily illustrate the last 4 centuries from his quotations alone." (Chapter 9, The Meeting of Minds, 182)

"Then he told me ... he had cut his penis off." (Chapter 10, The Unkindest Cut, 190)

"Since the time of Minor and Davidian, the illness has become much more liberally regarded. Its name, for a start, has changed: What was initially the far less daunting word schizophrenia." (Chapter 11, Then Only the Monuments, 211)

"Other dictionaries in other languages took longer to make; but none was greater, grander, or had more authority than this. The greatest effort since the invention of printing. The longest sensational serial ever written." (Chapter 11, Then Only the Monuments, 220)

Topics for Discussion

What prompted the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary?

How did James Murray become editor of the Oxford English Dictionary?

How did William Minor contribute to the Oxford English Dictionary?

Name two emotionally difficult events in William Minor's life that may have triggered his paranoia and discuss them; also use them to explain why Minor kills George Merrett.

Why did Dr. Minor cut off his penis, in your opinion? What might it have to do with Eliza Merrett?

Discuss two of William Minor and James Murray's significant and unusual commonalities.

Explain in detail the reasons the Oxford English Dictionary was originally considered a good idea; which of those reasons are still good reasons? Which aren't?