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Winchester, Simon. T*he Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary.* London and New York: HarperCollins, 1998. Pp. xiii + 242. CDN$19.00, (paper).

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It seems particularly apposite that a book about the making of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is being reviewed in a year in which Victoriana is being celebrated, scrutinized, and in some cases re-invented, for 2001 marks not only the centenary of the Queen-Empress's death but also the 150th anniversary of that quintessential symbol of the Victorian era—the Great Exhibition of 1851. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, or as it is commonly known the *OED,* is every bit as much a symbol of the Victorian era, and it arguably cast an even longer shadow. The *OED* was a defining feature of the Victorian intellectual and cultural landscape for it differed from its predecessors not simply in terms of its depth and breadth, but also in its underlying architecture. It was designed from the outset to be an inventory of words in the English language, a catalogue that would document in fine detail word usage and meaning by tracking the genealogy of each word. It was not intended to be prescriptive, nor was it designed to fix proper usage. But it was given the task of documenting and celebrating the rise of what many contemporaries viewed as the first truly global lingua franca. In the words of Richard Chenevix Trench (d. 1886), Dean of Westminster and one of the original proponents of the project, "A dictionary is an historical monument, the history of a nation contemplated from one point of view" (105).

Hence, the *OED* can best be appreciated if it is located within the wider social and cultural priorities of Victorian Britain, particularly its obsession with collecting and classifying, both useful hobbies in a growing empire. The fact that its foundations were first laid down at a meeting held in 1857 hints of these imperial overtones, for that year witnessed the outbreak of the Indian Rebellion, a series of uprisings in India that threatened the very survival of the British Raj. One of the chief lessons the British learned from that experience was the need for information, and the means to classify, analyze, and disseminate it. Philology and lexicography were crucial components of this will to know that also came to include other disciplines such as statistics, ethnology, and natural history. For those reasons, many readers would not dispute the author's declaration (though they may take umbrage at the assumptions that underpin it) that, "It is an awe-inspiring work, the most important reference book ever made, and, given the unending importance of the English language, probably the most important that is ever likely to be" (27). It was also a long time in coming. First mooted in 1857, it was only in 1879 that Oxford University Press took it on, and did so on the assumption that the project would culminate ten years later in a four-volume reference work. Instead, and like many academic projects, the publishers would be very quickly disabused of their faith in the pace of scholarly productivity. The *OED* would not be complete until 1928, and by then it had trebled in size to twelve volumes.

Yet few readers would anticipate that such a robustly Victorian institution as the *OED* could have an exciting history—a worthy history of course, and perhaps even an intriguing history, but the very idea of an electrifying history of a dictionary would strike many as oxymoronic at least. Nor would we expect lexicographers to be fitting subjects for a book intended for a wide readership. Even the most famous lexicographer of all, Samuel Johnson (and himself the subject of a number of exceptional biographies), described the lexicographer as "a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words" (95). Hardly promising as the basis for a book aimed at a popular audience. But Minor was neither harmless or a drudge. He was in fact a murderer who prepared his submissions to the *OED* from his cell at the Asylum for the Criminally Insane at Broadmoor. He experienced frequent fits of paranoia, often complaining of strange nocturnal visitors who sneaked into his room at night and did bizarre things to him. Eventually, he was driven to using a penknife to reduce his penis to a bare stump.

An author approaching the *OED* would therefore have an ideal opportunity to blend together the intellectual and the personal histories and thereby breathe life into the story of such a venerable institution. But there is a risk that the more sensational dimensions of this story would dominate. Fortunately, the *OED* has been well served by Simon Winchester. He has approached the history of the *OED* through the juxtaposition of two characters: Dr. James Murray, its first and most influential editor, a scholar of humble background but grandiose lexicographical ambitions; and Dr. W.C. Minor, a one-time American military surgeon, born into a good and pious family, who became one of Murray's most valuable contributors, despite—or more likely because of—his mental condition. The story of Murray and Minor has been told before, but never with such detail or with such an eye to what their lives, individually and collectively, reveal about the wider societies in which they lived and worked.

Striking a balance between the popular and the scholarly is, however, a tricky and some would say impossible task. Writers have to make choices, and in this case Winchester has opted for the general reader though I would hasten to add that the *Professor and the Madman* is informed by a very sensitive reading of the historical record. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with an appeal to the wider public, and some would argue that most historians' predisposition to pitch their works to their own cohort has only served to marginalize the profession. But in writing for the public, and in striving to keep their attention, the author has adopted a personal and emotive tone that in some places is a bit anachronistic and in others it only serves to demonstrate his own prejudices. A case in point is the author's tendency to resort to juxtapositions of grimy cityscapes with much more salubrious neighbourhoods. Lambeth, which is where Minor committed his murder, is especially hard done by, coming across as not only unloved but unlovable. In an aside, the author concludes that Lambeth today is not much better. In New Haven, where Minor was buried, we are told that his cemetery is protected by a chain-link fence from the "angry part of New Haven," which in turn is contrasted with the "stern elegance of Yale" (219). Seven pages later, we are reminded that Minor's grave in New Haven is "hemmed in between litter and slums" (226). Another sign that the author (and/or the publisher) was aiming for the general public is the absence of such scholarly conventions as citations or bibliographies. In their place, tucked away at the back, we have a brief guide to further reading. This is unfortunate as it would be nice to pursue further some of the themes raised in this book.

The Professor and the Madman has already garnered much critical acclaim and most of that has been richly deserved. It makes for a compelling read, combining the best practices of history and journalism into one package. It is without risk of exaggeration one of the most enjoyable books I have read over the past several years.