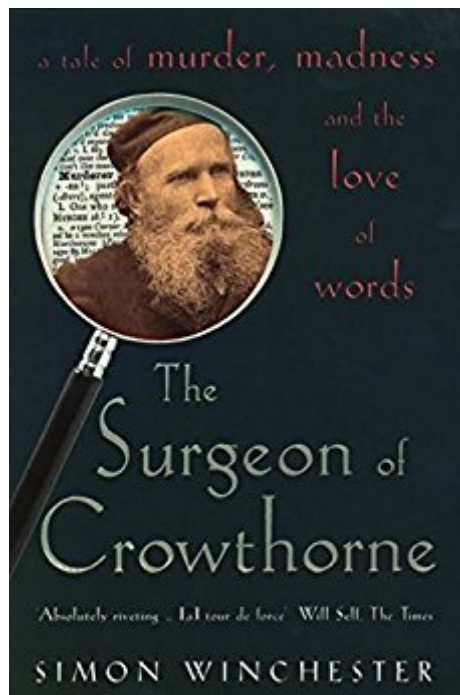




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# The Surgeon Of Crowthorne: A Tale Of Murder, Madness And The Oxford English Dictionary



## Synopsis

The making of the Oxford English Dictionary was a monumental 50 year task requiring thousands of volunteers. One of the keenest volunteers was a W C Minor who astonished everyone by refusing to come to Oxford to receive his congratulations. In the end, James Murray, the OED's editor, went to Crowthorne in Berkshire to meet him. What he found was incredible - Minor was a millionaire American civil war surgeon turned lunatic, imprisoned in Broadmoor Asylum for murder and yet who dedicated his entire cell-bound life to work on the English language.

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## Customer Reviews

THE SURGEON of CROWTHORNE It's the story of the relationship between the Scottish man that headed the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary & the man that contributed the most as a volunteer layman to it's creation. The head of the project started life as a commoner & the layman was from a dynastic American family. The layman became a surgeon & served during the Revolutionary War. These opposites ring their lives & yet they spent 20 years working together on

the OED (which took 70 years to finish) but never met until about 10 years into their collaboration on the project despite the fact they were but few miles apart. The Scot holds the place of one of the finest scholars that ever lived & the American descended into madness & killed an innocent Englishman in England due to his insanity. The American then spent all but the final 10 years of his life in a sanatorium, quite literally insane until his death in 1920 & the Scot did not know that his number one amateur contributor was in an asylum until ten years of collaboration had past. This, despite the fact they lived less than 45 miles apart. The book is a contrast of their lives & a telling of their collaboration done in such a way as to be hypnotic. It also covers the difficulties of creating dictionaries but that is a side story. The contrast, comparison, confluence & inverted results of these two lives from their beginnings to their ends is told in a style that I can only compare to Paul Harvey's *The Rest of the Story*. It is also a grander use of the English language than Paul used in my mind. I simply can't read it fast because I don't want to. I read a few pages, think about what's in them & then read a few more. I can't recommend it highly enough to those that like History & researched personal stories about those that lived through them. Two great & fascinating characters who you would never expect to meet each other, let alone becoming the cornerstones of a great undertaking that didn't end for seventy years. It's a good primer on those times too & certainly not an extremely long read. The ending of the story is a paean to sadness, tragedy & loss amidst the creation & fulfillment of a great project that is today the foundation of communication of thoughts, ideas & understanding in the English language. The Author's Note at the end of the tale is not to be missed due to the accurate description of this tale & the impact on those involved. A story of powerful achievement that is yet overpowered by its description of an all too human series of events that has as it's single redeeming feature its facilitation of understanding between humanity.

Wonderful Simon Winchester wrote three books on the development of the Oxford Dictionary and all are worth reading as they together provide a full picture of the writing of this dictionary. When reading, I noticed how erratic spelling was, even with proper names. Words drop in and out of use and even seem to change meaning. Hah! There was no standard such as a dictionary for spelling, meaning and usage of words. It's a wonder that Shakespeare, the American Founding fathers, Hawthorne, and so many others wrote text we read and understand now in the absence of a reference. This particular books tell about the contributions of an American doctor who was institutionalized for mental health problems, perhaps due to his service in the army during the Civil War. The doctor was institutionalized in England where he passed his time reading and submitting papers about words and examples of their usage in English literature. What a wonderful contribution

to our appreciation of English. Hurray for Simon Winchester who writes superb books on a range of topics and makes the science and/or the history so very accessible.

This book was recommended to me by lucky chance, as otherwise I may never have discovered the delight of reading *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*. Simon Winchester is a master of his craft - every page is written with sensitivity and takes you into other worlds. Right down to the final Postscript, Simon keeps you enthralled with this compelling narrative. Tragic it may well be, but an extraordinary tale, not only of the fine line between madness and genius but how the Dictionary that shaped our very language came into being.

An historical account in novel form the key protagonist in this book is a real life madman and a murdering madman at that. Although obviously in possession of a brilliant mind some of his actions are inexplicable, shocking even. So why did I come to sympathise with him so much? The author himself is entirely non committal in terms of his judgement of this man's weaknesses but there is something about his almost arms length writing style and his gentle unravelling of the story that gives the reader no choice but to form an opinion. Parallel to the madman's story runs the incredible true story of the beginning of the Oxford English Dictionary. And what a story it is. The sheer immensity of the task of defining every word in the English language is articulated brilliantly as volunteers labour painstakingly to provide examples of the use of every single word in alphabetical order. Entertaining, enlightening and strangely emotive I highly recommend this book.

I think took me half the book before I decided to actually read it! It reads like a documentary rather than a story. Quite interesting once I figured that was it. As a 'documentary', I liked it although I would not have ventured past a quarter of it were it not for the book club book of the month.

Fabulous, riveting read. The opening chapter was read as an introduction on a lecture entitled "You and I" about the relationship between reader and writer. And, of course, the only way that the two can communicate is through words. This book is about how words got defined but it reads like a detective story.

This book was totally fascinating. I have always loved the OED and especially as it is based on historical principles. So to find out about the massive research that went into it was really interesting. But to find that one of the greatest contributors was a person in an Asylum of the

Criminally Insane was amazing. A really great read and very well written.

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