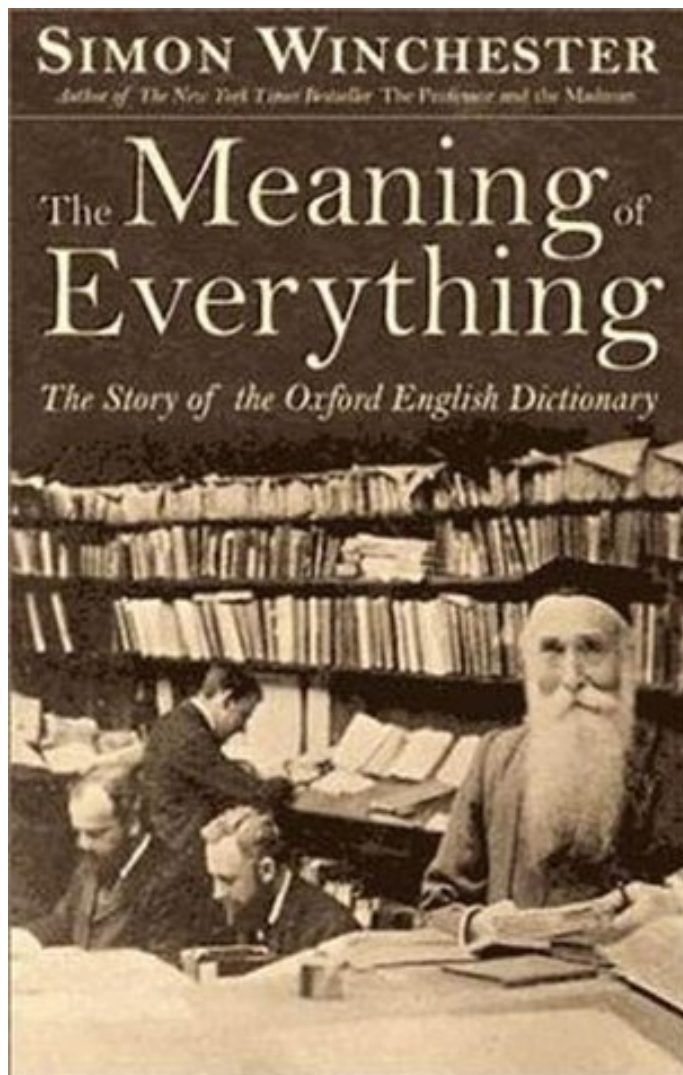

Simon Winchester

The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary



Title: The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary

Author: Simon Winchester

Format: Kindle Edition

Language: English

Pages: 288

Publisher: , 0

ISBN:

Format: PDF / Kindle / ePub

Size: 7.7 MB

Download: allowed

Description

From the best-selling author of *The Professor and the Madman*, *The Map That Changed the World*, and *Krakatoa* comes a truly wonderful celebration of the English language and of its unrivaled treasure house, the Oxford English Dictionary.

Writing with marvelous brio, Winchester first serves up a lightning history of the English language--"so vast, so sprawling, so wonderfully unwieldy"--and pays homage to the great dictionary makers, from "the irredeemably famous" Samuel Johnson to the "short, pale, smug and boastful" schoolmaster from New Hartford, Noah Webster. He then turns his unmatched talent for story-telling to the making of this most venerable of dictionaries. In this fast-paced narrative, the reader will discover lively portraits of such key figures as the brilliant but tubercular first editor Herbert Coleridge (grandson of the poet), the colorful, boisterous Frederick Furnivall (who left the project in a shambles), and James Augustus Henry Murray, who spent a half-century bringing the project to fruition. Winchester lovingly describes the nuts-and-bolts of dictionary making--how unexpectedly tricky the dictionary entry for marzipan was, or how fraternity turned out so much longer and monkey so much more ancient than anticipated--and how bondmaid was left out completely, its slips found lurking under a pile of books long after the B-volume had gone to press. We visit the ugly corrugated iron structure that Murray grandly dubbed the Scriptorium--the Scrippy or the Shed, as locals called it--and meet some of the legion of volunteers, from Fitzedward Hall, a bitter hermit obsessively devoted to the OED, to W. C. Minor, whose story is one of dangerous madness, ineluctable sadness, and ultimate redemption.

The Meaning of Everything is a scintillating account of the creation of the greatest monument ever erected to a living language. Simon Winchester's supple, vigorous prose illuminates this dauntingly ambitious project--a seventy-year odyssey to create the grandfather of all word-books, the world's unrivalled uber-dictionary.

Insightful reviews

Lolita Lark: Winchester has given us a smasher here. Who would ever, in their right mind, think that the history of the 54 years it took them to create the first Oxford English Dictionary would be such a treat? We're talking of a delightful précis of a project of several lifetimes, where several of the editors up and died before their work was done.

The early years were consumed with agony and backbiting. The Philological Society of London thought up the project, and the first editor, Herbert Coleridge turned pale and died after a year on the job. Some time after, the greatest editor of them all, James Murray, drove everyone to distraction by moving ever ... so ... slowly. He decided to publish the dictionary in bits and pieces, the first (A - Ant) with over 8000 words, came out twenty-seven years after work had commenced.

Samuel Johnson set the stage for the OED, for the editors wanted not only all English words included --- and the emphasis is on all --- but that they would be defined and then illustrated with copious quotes. The final 12 volume OED, completed in 1928, carried slightly over 400,000 words, but was illustrated with some 2,000,000 quotes.

Oh the characters that worked on it over the years! Frederick Furnivall, an early editor, loved sculling and pretty young women --- so that during his time of service, he created a Ladies' Sculling Club in West London. Then there were Murray's funny hats, great white beard, and eleven children (all employed in the project at some time in their lives).

One of the thousands of contributors, Fritzeard Hall, spoke nine languages and "wrote every single day ... with sheet after sheet of proofs, corrected, changed, closely read and carefully parsed." William Chester Minor was a murderer working from his cell at Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane. (Winchester recently published a book on Minor, called *The Professor and the Madman*.)

There is J. R. R. Tolkien, employed in 1919 --- mostly concentrating on "W" (warm, wasp, water, wick, wallop, waggle, winter). He said that the time he worked on the OED he learned more "than any other equal period of my life." In one of the many delightful footnotes to *The Meaning of Everything*, we are told that Tolkien "found sufficient evidence for the existence of the strange expression the right to wallop one's own nigger to prepare a slip for it: but his seniors at the Dictionary thought it too offensive (and insufficiently illustrative) and so did not use it."...

Read the rest on RaphMag.org

Steven Yenser: Having read and only somewhat remembered *The Professor and the Madman* -- which Winchester apparently wrote earlier and tells a zoomed-in account of OED Editor James Murray and his clinically insane contributor, Dr. W.C. Minor -- I found *The Meaning of Everything* to be an interesting if not always exciting account of the creation of the OED.

It was wonderful to think about the fluidity of English in Victorian England and just how much mental labor was required to create the first truly complete dictionary. I wonder how many such "purely academic" endeavors would keep their research funding for six decades today.

Darla: Amazing to think of putting together the OED in the days before computers. SW obviously loved his topic and loved big words; I felt I needed the dictionary on hand to look up several words per page. It was accessible but still very academic and I could only read a few pages at a time.

Stephanie: i will not suggest this enough. Fascinating, humor-full and intensely readable. you would not imagine this could be funny, however it is. I suggest laugh-out-loud funny. possibly i am a whole nerd yet this is often interesting and enjoyable and entire of items you don't want to know! the folk who contributed to the dictionary are actually interesting. I enjoyed listening to approximately notice origins and the way they healthy into the dictionary -- I want Winchester might write extra in this topic. i have fallen in love along with his writing variety which sounds to me as if it is intended to be learn aloud via a middle-aged British man. i have now onto his Map that modified the World.

Annette: After I informed my husband that i stopped this book, he requested the way it was. I acknowledged "It was once type of boring." And he checked out me and said, "Annette, it used to be a historical past of the dictionary. What did you expect." So um. Yeah.Moral of the story:

you could stab girls and now have a major vocabulary.

James F: Winchester's past ebook in regards to the making of the OED, *The Madman and the Professor*, was once this month's analyzing for the Utah kingdom Library publication Discussion. whilst I published my evaluation of that on Shelfari, I remarked that i wanted he had concentrated much less at the one tale of Dr. Minor and extra at the dictionary itself; somebody in a single of my chat groups mentioned that he had written this book, and that i asked the library get it. it is a interesting booklet a few topic that would not appear at the face of it to be that fascinating (like his biography of William Smith who invented the geological map) -- the making of the world's biggest dictionary. there's a lot right here concerning the those that made the OED, who have been frequently greater than eccentric -- Dr. Minor was once no longer the single "madman" involved, notwithstanding might be the main severe -- yet much more fascinating to me used to be the dialogue of what a dictionary might be and the way the OED was once built in an age ahead of pcs or maybe typewriters. A needs to learn for note geeks.

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