



THE PROFESSOR AND THE MADMAN

reviewed by Bryan A. Garner

WE LIVE IN A GREAT AGE for lexicography: with a few key-strokes, it's possible to discover when a given word or phrase came into English, the contexts in which it has most commonly appeared decade by decade, and the diachronic frequency of its use relative to competing terms. Computing and big data have fundamentally changed the environment in which lexicographers toil. That was apparent to me even in 1979, when as an undergraduate student I met Dr. Robert W. Burchfield at Trinity College, Oxford, and suggested over drinks that the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) ought to be computerized so that the main dictionary could be merged with the four-volume *Supplement* on which he was then working.

"That will never happen," he replied. "It's an impossibly huge task."

But just ten years later, it had indeed happened. Burchfield's two chief lieutenants, Edmund S.C. Weiner and John Simpson, had taken over as coeditors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and had overseen the complex

*Bryan A. Garner has been a lexicographer since 1981. His first book, now called (in its third edition) *Garner's Dictionary of Legal Usage*, was published by Oxford University Press in 1987. He has been the editor in chief of *Black's Law Dictionary* for its past five editions, since 1995; the 11th edition, published by Thomson Reuters, appeared in June 2019. The 1,100-page *Garner's Modern English Usage*, now in its fourth edition with Oxford University Press, is the most extensive usage guide ever published; in it, Garner relies heavily on corpus linguistics to ascertain the facts of Standard Written English. Copyright 2019 Bryan A. Garner.*

task of merging the two big works. Barely three years after Burchfield had completed his lifetime's magnum opus (the *Supplement*), it was obsoleted by the second edition of the full dictionary.

Long before computerization, though, the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* – known at the time as the *New English Dictionary* – was completed the old-fashioned way: with hundreds of thousands of paper slips on which scholarly contributors recorded illustrative quotations of English words and phrases that had appeared somewhere in English literature. These were sorted into slots housed in a metal shed built behind the house of a Scottish autodidact, James A.H. Murray, who in 1879 was named editor in chief of the *OED*. Murray called his shed the “Scriptorium,” and his house, at 78 Banbury Road, Oxford, was named “Sunnyside.” Murray and his small team of lexicographers carried out their important work of marshaling the English vocabulary in that humble but grandly named Scriptorium.

Installing the Scriptorium was no mean feat. As told in the delightful biography by Murray's granddaughter, *Caught in the Web of Words* (1977), Murray lived next door to the celebrated law professor A.V. Dicey, who in 1885 complained that Murray's backyard structure would “injure his outlook” on the spires of Oxford. To accommodate Dicey, the delegates to Oxford University Press required that the Scriptorium be sunk three feet into the ground. As a result, for the next 30 years that Murray would work there, the Scriptorium was perpetually damp. In the summer it was stuffy and moist. In the winter it was dank and cold. Three times over the years, Murray contracted pneumonia, and never did a winter pass in which he didn't get the chills. In this unhealthful environment, Murray and his staff uncomplainingly carried on their tedious work of amassing the largest dictionary ever written.

Despite their less-than-optimal start as neighbors, the Murrays and the Diceys became close friends over the years, and Mrs. Dicey soon forgot that there had ever been objections to the height of the Scriptorium.

Several excellent books have been written about how the greatest scholarly monument to the Victorian Age was carried out in this shed of corrugated metal. Among these are Peter Gilliver's monumental *The Making of the Oxford English Dictionary* (2016) and Simon Winchester's *The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary* (2003).

The Professor and the Madman

But by far the most popular such book is *The Professor and the Madman* (1998), also by Simon Winchester. It tells the fascinating story of an American physician named William C. Minor, who served in the Civil War and amputated soldiers' limbs when necessary. In the years following the war, Minor became delusional and schizophrenic. He traveled to London in 1871 and settled in Lambeth, a rough area of London. A mere six weeks later, suffering under a paranoid fear, Minor became convinced that George Merrett – an innocent father of seven – was in fact an Irish assassin who had been stalking him. Minor shot and killed Merrett on the street. After a sensational trial, Minor was incarcerated in Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane.

There he painted and read. About 1880, somewhere in his reading he encountered James A.H. Murray's call for readers to contribute to the *Oxford English Dictionary* by submitting illustrative quotations. Soon, Minor became one of Murray's most prodigious contributors, sending slips to the Scriptorium almost weekly. His contributions proved to be reliably erudite, painstakingly accurate, and astonishingly copious. Murray thought Minor must be the superintendent of Broadmoor. Only upon paying a visit to the asylum in January 1891 did Murray learn the truth. Thus began a friendship that lasted nearly 20 years and included many visits by Murray to his friend the inmate. Hence the title *The Professor and the Madman*.

Winchester's well-researched and gripping account by that name – involving a wary beginning to what became a flourishing friendship between Minor and George Merrett's widow, the steadfast compassion of Murray, the gradual descent of Minor into deeper levels of madness, and the intervention of Winston Churchill to send Minor back home to America – became an international bestseller. In 1998-1999, I received no fewer than seven gift copies of the book from various friends, doubtless because I was the only lexicographer they knew.

The story has now come to the big screen. In May 2019, Voltage Pictures released *The Professor and the Madman*, starring Mel Gibson as Murray, Sean Penn as Minor, and Natalie Dormer as Eliza Merrett. The release was held up in litigation between Gibson and Voltage over issues relating to editing and whether certain scenes would be filmed in Oxford or Ireland. As a result, even the directorial credits are now dubious. Farhad Safinia, the novice director retained by Gibson, was replaced in the final credits by the

utterly fictitious P.B. Sherman. These messy aspects of the film's making have been much written about elsewhere.

As for the film itself, there is a certain attraction to a mood-setting depiction of Victorian scholarship. Murray surmounted many hardships to make his dictionary – financial, familial, faculty-related, and philological. This film is the most realistic portrayal ever made about lexicographic endeavors, and parts of it are poignant.

Yet the screenplay is beset with banal dialogue, supporting actors whose roles are one-dimensional caricatures, and dramatic license that distorts the facts. For example, Minor is known to have engaged in genital self-mutilation. But in the film, this rather graphically displayed act is attributed to guilt over a love that developed between him and Mrs. Merrett. In the book, that's presented only as an improbable speculation on Winchester's part. Also, the film has Murray shouting angrily (perhaps heroically) at Winston Churchill, the home secretary, in a busy room in Whitehall, pleading for Minor's release. In fact, no such scene ever occurred: Churchill reviewed Minor's case on the papers and decided on his own to deport the American to his home shores.

No less bothersome to the linguistically adept viewer are the anachronistic blunders. Gibson's Murray says that "Milton was somewhat of a purist" (for *was something of a purist*) and that Samuel Johnson's dictionary "was comprised of only a handful of words" (factually quite wrong, but the phrasing should be that the dictionary *comprised only a handful*); Frederick Furnivall, Murray's *OED* backer, says *illustrated quotation* in place of *illustrative quotation* and *you have showed them* for *you have shown them*; and Dr. Brayne, head of Broadmoor, misuses *beg the question* (in the sense of inviting a question) and says *give it a miss* (a phrase not popularized until the mid-20th century). Murray even makes reference to those who cheat on the *Times* crossword puzzle – some 30 years before such puzzles were introduced into newspapers.

These quibbles might have been prevented if Winchester himself had consulted on the film. Yet they're just quibbles. To a lexicographer, the joy in the film is seeing a realistic version of the inside of Dr. Murray's Scriptorium.

The Professor and the Madman



James A.H. Murray (seated, center) in his Scriptorium (1915).



Having just come of age when Elisabeth K.M. Murray's *Caught in the Web of Words* was first published in 1977, I have long thought that a scriptorium is the ideal backyard structure for any serious lexicographer. So two years ago I finally built one. There's little authenticity in my replica. Murray's Scriptorium was a 750-square-foot damp, musty, and drafty shed. Mine is bigger, on a concrete foundation seven inches off the ground at its lowest point, with central heat and air. That's where I keep my dictionary files for *Black's Law Dictionary*, my two usage dictionaries for Oxford University Press, and my other language-related books. I wanted a comfortably inauthentic structure.

Inside my scriptorium, near the entry, is a small shrine to James A.H. Murray, with six photographs of him, of his house in Oxford, and of the original Scriptorium. (Well, okay, the *original* scriptoria were inhabited by



Bryan A. Garner's Scriptorium, with his shrine to A.H. Murray on the left side of this photograph (2019). Compare the beard in the largest framed picture to the beard on the figure seated in the center of the picture on the previous page.

monks in the Middle Ages — but I'm talking here about lexicographic scriptoria.) With those photographs I've hung two framed letters written by Murray from his Scriptorium. One is to a young woman who in 1907 wrote to Murray asking for his autograph. He replies pertly: "Dear Madam, Do you not think that ladies who ask by letter for autographs ought to send their photographs, in order that it may be known to what fair faces they are granted? Yours very truly, James A.H. Murray."

The other is to a newspaper editor who seems to have inquired about someone's novel suggestion of a fanciful etymology for the term *Anglo-Saxon*. It's a letter that seems to have eluded Winchester in his exhaustive research, and no wonder. It came on the market only a few years ago, and I acquired it almost immediately after. It was written a decade after Murray had begun visiting the Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane. Here's what it says:

The Professor and the Madman

23 April 1901

Dear Sir:

I have your second letter and clipping about *Anglo-Saxon*. Your newspaper must be badly off for matter, to print such ravings: or perhaps they think it a good joke. The taste of notions about jokes differs a good deal.

I am afraid I could not tell you whether “the idea was ever before suggested,” unless I were to inquire at all the Lunatic Asylums of the world. And if we did find out that some other lunatic, in or out of some asylum, had on some occasion suggested “the idea,” what would it matter? There is a great deal of useful work to be done, before we begin to collect and coordinate the ravings of madmen. If the newspapers print them as colossal jokes, let them!

Yours very truly,

James A.H. Murray

Murray didn’t print the ravings of this putative madman, but he did print another’s lucid collectanea. And in the early volumes of the *OED*, English speakers have benefited, and will continue to benefit, from the manic efforts of Dr. William C. Minor. But mostly we remain indebted to the indefatigable James A.H. Murray, who wanted to record the meaning of every English word – and came remarkably close in an age long before computers.

JB