NOTES FROM: ***The Professor and the Madman*****, by Simon Winchester**

SUMMARY: This is a book about the making of the Oxford English Dictionary – Wait! Don't go! – and, no shit, it's also a Mel Gibson movie now. The angle here though has to do with the fact that one member of the gigantic effort to compile the dictionary had submitted more than *ten thousand entries* before anyone knew much of anything about who he was. He never visited the main office where most of the work was taking place because, well, he couldn't travel; he was an inmate at an institution for the criminally insane.

This is a *wild* story, and true, as far as the records go; and even though it involves murder and madness and mayhem, you don't end up with the sense that there's a "bad guy" here. W.C. Minor (the inmate and prolific reader/contributor to the dictionary) looks to have suffered some horrific PTSD during the American Civil War and ends up killing a stranger in the early hours of the morning after his mind had been taken over by paranoid delusions. He chases this man, George Merrett, into the street, and mistakenly shoots him in the neck.

Obviously, he's guilty of murder, but the story of Minor's particular madness, and the parallel effort to construct the Oxford English Dictionary with Minor's help is just fascinating and incredible. You feel sorry for Minor, you feel sorry for Merrett, and you're just swept up in all the unlikeliness of the whole thing – and, speaking for myself, you end up feeling grateful that events unfolded as they did, and that a writer as talented as Simon Winchester came along to write everything down.

About James Murray, the organizer of the effort to publish the dictionary: "His younger brothers would tell how he once awakened them late one night to show them the rising of Sirius, the Dog Star, whose orbit and appearance over the horizon he had calculated and that proved, to the family's sleepy exultation, to be perfectly correct.

"These were the soldiers of the Second Brigade – the Irish Brigade – and they were braver and rougher than almost any other unit in the entire Federal army. 'When anything absurd, forlorn, or desperate was to be attempted,' as one English war correspondent wrote, 'the Irish Brigade was called upon.'"

"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. There was none available, for instance, when William Shakespeare was writing his plays. Whenever he came to use an unusual word, or to set a word in what seemed an unusual context – and his plays are extraordinarily rich with examples – he had almost no way of checking the propriety of what he was about to do. He was not able to reach into his bookshelves and select any one volume to help: He would not be able to find any book that might tell him if the word he had chosen was properly spelled, whether he had selected it correctly, or had used it in the right way in the proper place.

Shakespeare was not even able to perform a function that we consider today as perfectly ordinary a function as reading itself. He could not, as the saying goes, 'look something up.'"

"The questions are worth posing simply to illustrate what we would now think of as the profound inconvenience of his not once being able to refer to a dictionary. At the time he was writing there were atlases aplenty, there were prayer books, missals, histories, biographies, romances, and books of science and art. Shakespeare is though to have drawn many of his classical allusions from a specialized Thesaurus that had been compiled by a man named Thomas Cooper – its many errors are replicated far too exactly in the plays for it to be a coincidence – and he is thought also to have drawn from Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique*. But that was all; there were no other literary, linguistic, and lexical conveniences available. In the sixteenth century in England, dictionaries such as we would recognize today simply did not exist. If the language that so inspired Shakespeare had limits, if its words had definable origins, spellings, pronunciations, *meanings* – then no single book existed that established them, defined them, and set them down. It is perhaps difficult to imagine so creative a mind working without a single work of lexicographical reference beside him, other than Mr. Cooper's crib (which Mrs. Cooper once threw into the fire, prompting the great man to begin all over again) and Mr. Wilson's little manual, but that was the condition under which his particular genius was compelled to flourish. The English language was spoken and written – but at the time of Shakespeare it was not defined, not *fixed.* It was like the air – it was taken for granted, the medium that enveloped and defined all Britons. But as to exactly what it was, what its components were – who knew?"

About Samuel Johnson: "His dictionary would thus be the result of a concerted trawl through just a century and a half of writing, with the odd piece of Chaucer thrown in for good measure. So Johnson took down these books and read, then underlined and circled words he wanted, and annotated the pages he had chosen; he then demanded that his men copy onto slips of paper the full sentences that displayed his chosen words; and these he then filed, to use when necessary, to illustrate the point he was making, the meaning of a word that he was trying to show. And it was all those quoted meanings, a demonstration of the multiplicity of subtle shadings of sense that can be encompassed by the simple arrangement of a group of letters, that prove the great triumph of Johnson's dictionary. For while we might laugh at the quaint charm of his definition of *elephant,* or of *oats* ('a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people'), or *lexicographer* ('a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words'), we can only be staggered by his dealing with, say, the verb *take.* Johnson listed, with supportive quotations, no fewer than 113 senses of this particular verb's transitive form and 21 of the intransitive. 'To seize, grasp or capture; to catch with a hook; to catch someone in an error; to win popular favor; to be effective; to claim to do something; to assume the right…to mount a horse, to flee, to perform what one does in removing one's clothing…' The list is almost endless: It was a mark of Samuel Johnson's genius that, armed with references from 150 years of English writings, he was able, and essentially single-handedly, to find and note almost every use of every word of the day. Not simply *take;* but other common coin like *set* and *do* and *go* and hundreds upon hundreds of others. Small wonder that once his project was well under way, and the trifling business of his creditors' needs arose, he once barred the door to the milkman with his bed, crying from behind the door, 'Depend on it, I will defend this little citadel to the utmost!'"

“Throughout it all, under the rains of slings, arrows, plaudits, and encomiums, Samuel Johnson remained calmly modest. Not unduly so, for he was proud of his work but awed by the magnificence of the language he, with such foolhardiness, had chosen to tackle. The book remained his monument. James Murray was to say in later years that whenever someone used the phrase ‘the Dictionary,’ as one might say ‘the Bible’ or ‘the Prayer Book,’ he or she referred to the work by Doctor Johnson. But no, Literature’s Great Cham would have said – in fact it was the words that were the truest monument, and even more profoundly, the very entities that those words defined. ‘I am not yet so lost in lexicography,’ he says in his famous preface, ‘as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven.’”

The wife of the man W.C. Minor shot in error as the result of his paranoid delusions became a regular visitor of his at the institution, and even brought him books. It was within one of these books that Murray’s written appeal for help on the new dictionary made its way to Minor. Minor also gave money to George Merret’s wife to help her deal financially with the loss of her husband.

“The packages would come in each morning, a thousand or so slips a day. One reader would check quickly to see if the quotation was full and all words were spelled properly; then a second – often one of Murray’s children, each of whom was employed almost as soon as he or she was literate, paid sixpence a week for half an hour a day and rendered precociously crossword capable – would sort the contents of each bundle into the catchwords’ alphabetical order.”

Ironically, if W.C. Minor had ever received proper treatment for his mental illness, he never would have set in motion the chain of events which was to culminate in his being instrumental to the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary.

“One must feel a sense of strange gratitude, then, that his treatment was never good enough to divert him from his work. The agonies that he must have suffered in those terrible asylum nights have granted us all a benefit, for all time.”

“Twelve mighty volumes; 414,825 words defined; 1,827,306 illustrative quotations used, to which William Minor alone had contributed scores of thousands.”

“The only public memorials ever raised to the two most tragically linked of this saga’s protagonists are miserable, niggardly affairs. William Minor has just a simple little gravestone in a New Haven cemetery, hemmed in between litter and slums. George Merrett has for years had nothing at all, except for a patch of grayish grass in a sprawling graveyard in South London. Minor does, however, have the advantage of the great dictionary, which some might say acts as his most lasting remembrance. But nothing else remains to suggest that the man he killed was ever worthy of any memory at all. George Merrett has become an absolutely unsung man. Which is why it now seems fitting, more than a century and a quarter on, that this modest account begins with the dedication that it does. And why this book is offered as a small testament to the late George Merrett of Wiltshire and Lambeth, without whose untimely death these events would never have unfolded, and this tale could never have been told.”

“St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, D.C., is no longer a federal institution but is run by the government of the District of Columbia – a government that has experienced some well-publicized troubles in recent years. And at first, perhaps because of this, the hospital refused point-blank to release any of its files, and went so far as to suggest, quite seriously, that I engage a lawyer and sue in order to obtain them. However, some while later, a cursory search I made one day of the National Archives pages on the World Wide Web suggested to me that the papers relating to Doctor Minor – who had been a patient at St. Elizabeth’s between 1910 and 1919, when the institution was undeniably under federal jurisdiction – might well actually be in federal custody, and not within the Kafkaesque embrace of the District. And indeed, as it turned out, they were. A couple of requests through the Internet, a happy conversation with the extremely helpful archivist Bill Breach, and suddenly more than seven hundred pages of case notes and other fascinating miscellanea arrived in a FedEx package. It was more than gratifying to be able to telephone St. Elizabeth’s the next day and tell the unhelpful officials there which file I then had sitting before me on my desk. They were not best pleased.”