

## From the Back Verandah

England's northernmost town is Berwick-upon-Tweed, on the north-east coast of Northumberland, just south of the Scottish border. Originally part of Scotland, Berwick from the 12th century underwent a series of battles and ransom trades between England and Scotland that lasted 300 years. In that time it changed hands no less than 14 times, until in 1482 it permanently became part of England.

Berwick had already been proclaimed an fully independent district, with a Government separate from that of either England or Scotland, and a Court of its own (Lord Chancellor, Lord Chamberlain, bailiffs), and even its own mint. Indeed, up until 1885 no English Acts of Parliament were recognised

in Berwick unless they explicitly stated that they applied to the town. This meant that in strict official parlance the U.K. had to be referred to as "The United Kingdom of Great Britain, Northern Ireland and Berwick-upon-Tweed". (For all I know, it still does.)

This convention, however, failed to prevent a lovely blunder 50 years ago. When war was declared on Hitler's Germany, the full U.K. title was used, but at war's end somebody naughty forgot his protocol, and the peace declaration omitted mention of Berwick.

Berwick thus remained officially at war with Germany until the error was noticed — in 1987.

— Fizzgig

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# BIKWIL

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## Applying the Gag

Once we began our popular trivia column *Where Three Ways Meet*, there was no turning back. "Why not have a some jokes?" the cry went up. "Now and then we find good jokes on the Internet, or on the notice board at work. Let's share them in *Bikwil*."

Despite our initial disinclination, we have decided from this issue on to include in our pages an occasional handful of "did-you-hear-the-one-about's". We're calling the series *The Feral Joke Collector*.

Of course, any given yarn could easily turn out to be old hat to you. Jokes have this genetic propensity, don't they, to self-replicate so fast

that, before you know it, almost everybody is telling 'em? If you see some here like that, please bear with us — we promise that one day you'll turn the page and there will be the gag that'll make you the life and soul of your next dinner party.

As with *WTWM*, *The Feral Joke Collector* does not demand originality or even acknowledgment. All contributions will be tagged "Forwarded by . . ."

And before I forget. I've managed to track down a copy of that uproarious "hotel/motel-bars-of-soap" story that was doing the rounds a few years ago. Watch out for it in a few months' time.

## What's Inside?

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## Rhyme Or Reason

There I was, happy and secure  
in the conviction that the follow-  
ing nursery rhyme commemorates  
a specific historical event:

Ring-a-ring o' roses,  
A pocket full of posies,  
A-tishoo! A-tishoo!  
We all fall down.

That event being, of course, ei-  
ther the Great Plague of London  
(1664-6) which killed 70,000 peo-  
ple in south-east England, or pos-  
sibly the Black Death, which in  
five years in the middle of the 14th  
century wiped out a full third of  
Europe's population.

Well, I'm here to confess to you  
that I've learned the error of my  
ways. It would seem that modern  
experts, including Iona and Peter  
Opie (editors of *The Oxford Dic-  
tionary of Nursery Rhymes*, 1951)  
and Gloria T. Delamar (*Mother  
Goose: From Nursery to Litera-  
ture*, 1987), are very sceptical of  
the idea of any bubonic plague be-  
ing the inspiration for *Ring-a-Ring  
o' Roses*.

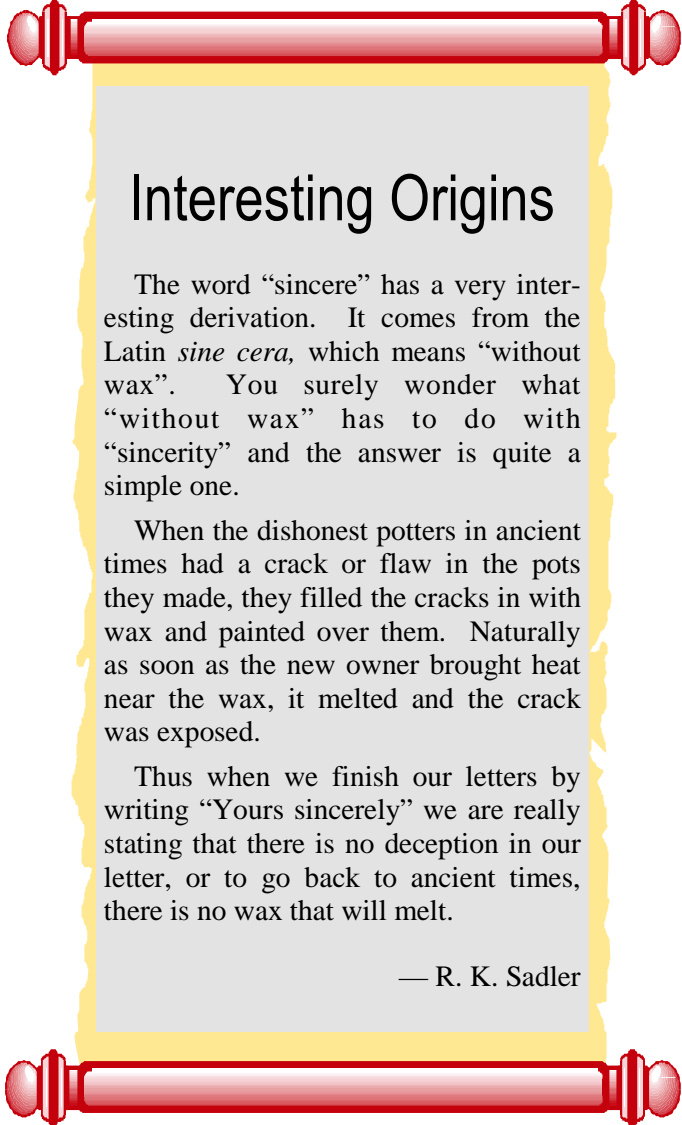
It is tempting, of course, to see  
a plague as the source of the  
rhyme. The "roses" could plausi-  
bly refer to the rash that always  
accompanies the disease, the

"posies" to herbs and spices used  
to sweeten the air, while "a-  
tishoo" would represent the sneez-  
ing, and "we all fall down" would  
imply inevitable death. A related  
conjecture would have it that the  
"ring" referred to the red spot that  
marked the onset of the disease.

No doubt, the belief arose be-  
cause a handful of nursery rhymes  
do derive from historical events or  
personalities, like *Little Jack  
Horner* (Thomas Horner of Mellis),  
*The Brave Old Duke of York*  
(probably George III's son, Fre-  
derick), *Jack Sprat* (Archdeacon  
Pratt), and *Humpty-Dumpty*  
(Richard III — maybe). Neverthe-  
less, as a rule,

[a]lthough many ingenious theories  
have been advanced attributing hid-  
den significance, especially political  
allusions, to nursery rhymes, there is  
no reason to suppose they are any  
more arcane than the popular songs  
of the day. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

For *Ring-a-Ring o' Roses* the  
case today seems clear. It is no  
more than a nursery chant, first  
recorded in print in 1881, one  
"which instantly rises from the lips  
of small children whenever they  
join hands in a circle". (Opie)  
There are several variants of the



### Interesting Origins

The word "sincere" has a very inter-  
esting derivation. It comes from the  
Latin *sine cera*, which means "without  
wax". You surely wonder what  
"without wax" has to do with  
"sincerity" and the answer is quite a  
simple one.

When the dishonest potters in ancient  
times had a crack or flaw in the pots  
they made, they filled the cracks in with  
wax and painted over them. Naturally  
as soon as the new owner brought heat  
near the wax, it melted and the crack  
was exposed.

Thus when we finish our letters by  
writing "Yours sincerely" we are really  
stating that there is no deception in our  
letter, or to go back to ancient times,  
there is no wax that will melt.

— R. K. Sadler

## Web

As you probably know by now, much of the Internet is dedicated to fan sites, and in this regard let me say that no one is better represented there than Elvis

Aaron Presley — no, not even Pamela Anderson. There are sites devoted to the astrology of Elvis' life, Elvis in Japan, the Elvis stamp, his will . . . oh, and his music.

With all that in mind, what better way for me to bring you more Internet nonsense than by describing two magnificently imbecilic sites with an Elvis theme?

First we have *Tickle Me Elvis*. Another of those completely futile places worth visiting immediately. It consists of a photo of the great man and the following invitation:

Move your cursor over Elvis if you want to tickle him. Click on him and he will laugh

I know you can't wait. But if you thought that was the height of absurdity, cast an incredulous



## Line

glance at this next one — *Americans for Cloning Elvis (ACE)*. Founder of this dedicated group and its (self-appointed?) president, Bob Meyer,

urges us to seize the possibilities for making EP copies, and begins his site with a petition:

We the undersigned, in our enduring love for Elvis, implore all those involved in cloning to hear our plea. Once cell would allow future generations to witness his presence. The technology is here, and this petition is a testament to our will . . .

There is a Latest News subpage (“Clinton outlaws human cloning”, etc.), and, of far greater consequence, a link to *Bob Meyer's Compendium of Elvis Sightings*.

When I last dared look, Bob Meyer was claiming 100 new supporters a week. Two of them had samples suitable for cloning — one a wart, the other a toenail.

Thank you vurry much.

— TR

### Internet sites referred to above:

<http://www.auschron.com/mrpants/elvis.html>

<http://www.geocities.com/Vienna/1673/>



song, and in none of them do the words imply any reference to the Great Plague. Furthermore,

. . . the time-lapse between the plague and the appearance of the game, diminishes . . . [the plague] theory. Satires are almost always written about then-current events . . . The [plague] interpretations continue to surface, however, probably because people in some perverse way would like to believe that the innocent rhyme has a grim history. (Delamar)

(The Black Death, of course was even more remote in time from the first appearance of *Ring-a-Ring o' Roses*, and thus even less likely to be the idea behind the verse.)

In short, the whole far-fetched bubonic edifice can be seen — if I may be so bold to put it in this non-Shakespearian way — as no more than the speculative jerry-building of “a house on both your plagues”.

Yet if you thought all that was too much, consider this. There's a fellow on the Internet, one Rich Stoney (<http://www.loggia.com/myth/wwwboard/messages/239.html>), who believes strongly that “some versions of *Ring a-round a Rosy* are based on the mythology of the Hindu god Shiva”.

In particular, he identifies the rhyme's source as Shiva's Dance

of Bliss, which “re-energizes life”. From his point of view, the sneezing interpretation of “A-tishoo!” is quite wrong:

I suggest that in reality, it is coughing as a result of his violent dance actions during which mountains are flattened and the cosmos themselves [*sic*] are destroyed.

Those who have recovered sufficiently to read on may now relax to the sound of a nice example of a 1949 parody which the Opies provide:

Ring-a-ring o' geranium,  
A pocket full of uranium,  
Hiro, Shima,  
All fall down.

The *Oxford Dictionary* has a germane quote, too, albeit a quite mysterious one, from *The Times* (1/4/1974, 1/8):

Strong men blenched and broke into a sweat of embarrassment when made to dance 'Ring-a-ring o' roses' in public outside Guildhall.

Tarnation seize me! What was going on outside Guildhall? If one of our readers gets to check this out before I do, I'd love to hear the full story.

But note that date.

— TR

# The World Outside

[ Title poem from a proposed book of poems for children ]

The world outside  
 how very wide  
 a world it is!  
 How high a mountain lifts!  
 How far the ocean drifts!  
 You cannot see the mountain tops  
 or where the drifting ocean stops,  
 and over them and farther still  
 the sky goes on and always will.  
 The world outdoors  
 must make us pause  
 to think of this.

The world outside  
 where things abide  
 so various  
 is awesome. Who can tell  
 what things of wonder dwell  
 in town and country, day and night!  
 So much to learn and think about!  
 So many lives both great and small,  
 some strong, some weak, with room for all.  
 The world out there  
 will need the care  
 of all of us.

— Bet Briggs

## Thirteen

A guy is walking past a big wooden fence at the insane asylum and he hears all the residents inside chanting, "Thirteen! Thirteen! Thirteen!"

Quite curious about this, he finds a hole in the fence, and looks in. Someone inside pokes him in the eye and, almost immediately, everyone inside the asylum starts chanting, "Fourteen! Fourteen! Fourteen!"

– Forwarded by Katisha

## Why Ignorance Rises to the Executive Level

First, three axioms:

- 1 Knowledge is Power
- 2 Time is Money
- 3 Power =  $\frac{\text{work}}{\text{Time}}$  (as every engineer knows)

Therefore, by substitution it follows that:

$$\text{Knowledge} = \frac{\text{work}}{\text{Money}}$$

Solving for Money, we get:

$$\text{Money} = \frac{\text{work}}{\text{Knowledge}}$$

Thus Money approaches infinity as Knowledge approaches zero, regardless of work done.

which means: The Less You Know, the More You Make.

– Forwarded by Trawler Travis

# The Feral Joke Collector



## Five-Year Plan

The European Union Commissioners announced today that agreement has been reached to adopt English as the preferred language standard for European communications, rather than German, which was the other possibility. As part of the negotiations Her Majesty's Government conceded that English spelling had some room for improvement and has accepted a five-year phased plan for what will be known as EuroEnglish.

In the first year, "s" will replace the soft "c". Certainly, this will make the sivil servants jump with joy. Also, the hard "c" will be replased with "k". Not only will this klear up konfusion but keyboards kan have one less letter.

There will be growing publik enthusiasm in the sekond year when the troublesome "ph" will be replased by "f". This will make words like "fotograf" 20% shorter.

In the third year, publik akseptanse of the new spelling kan be expekted to reach the stage where more komplikated changes are possible. Governments will enkourage the removal of double leters which have always been a deterrent to akurate speling. Also, al will agre that the horrible mes of the silent "e" in the languag is disgrasful and it should go away.

By the fourth year peopl will be reseptiv to steps such as replasing "th" with "z" and "w" with "v".

During ze fifz yer ze unesesary "o" or "u" can be dropd from vords kontaining "ou", and similar changes vud of kors be aplid to ozer kombinations of leters.

After zis fifz yer ve vill hav a sensibl riten styl. Zer vil be no mor trubl or difikultis, and evrivun vil find it ezi tu understand ech ozer.

Ze drem vill finali kum tru.

- Forwarded by landoc

# A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

No doubt you'll recall from my first article on the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*Bikwil* Nos. 8 and 9, 1998 July and September) that an indispensable feature of the Dictionary's genesis was the carefully crafted invitation by James Murray to readers worldwide to submit annotated citations of word usage.

As we know, the response was gratifyingly unstinting. The most prolific contributor to the First Edition was one Thomas Austin who transmitted no fewer than 165,000 quotations. The record so far for the most quotations submitted to the *OED* by one person, however, is held by Marghanita Laski, a.k.a. Sarah Russell, (1915-88), the well known British broadcaster, journalist and author, who managed to extract a quarter of a million quotations for the Reading Programmes of the *Supplement* and the Second Edition.

Tucked away in Murray's alphabetical acknowledgment list of the volunteers in the preface to the first completed volume is the entry "Dr. W.C. Minor of Crowthorne", and the enthralling tale that lies behind that innocuous single line of print is the centre of my column today. I do not intend retelling that story in all its beguiling detail for you,

however. Let me instead just mention enough particulars to whet your appetite for reading it in full in the recent biography of Dr. Minor by Simon Winchester. (Note: Most of the quotes herein come from the biography itself, some from Winchester's summary in the July 1998 issue of *Oxford English Dictionary News*, and others from various press reviews or interviews with Winchester.

To start with, I have to put you in the picture regarding a long-standing myth that Winchester refutes. This fabrication was about how, some years after Dr. Minor began contributing to the Dictionary, James Murray became aware of his strange situation.

As temptingly depicted by American journalist Hayden Church in the *Strand Magazine* in 1915, the original story went that Murray had become increasingly impressed with the work of his industrious contributor W.C. Minor, and invited him, together with other associates and contributors, to a celebratory Dictionary Dinner at Oxford in October 1897.

Minor declined the invitation pleading illness, but invited Murray to visit him at Crowthorne, in rural Berkshire.

Puzzled and maybe even a little exasperated, Murray is supposed eventually to have accepted the invitation. He is met at the railway station by coachman, carriage and horses. Upon arrival at their destination, a large country mansion, he is ushered into a book-lined study, where he makes a short speech of self-introduction to the important looking man he finds there.

Let's see how Winchester depicts the mythical dialogue:

"It is indeed an honour and a pleasure to at long last to make your acquaintance — for you must be, kind sir, my most assiduous helpmeet, Dr. W.C. Minor?" . . .

"I regret, kind sir, that I am not. It is not at all as you suppose. My name is Nicholson. I am in fact the Governor of the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum, and the Dr. Minor whom you seek is here because he is a murderer, and a madman. He is an American, and the longest-staying of all the asylum patients."

Church's article was quickly and strongly condemned by Henry Bradley (who'd recently been appointed Murray's successor as *OED* chief editor), in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in which he rebuked Church for "several misstatements of fact":

The story of Dr. Murray's first interview with Dr. Minor is, so far as its most romantic features are concerned, a fiction.

Despite this, the version was perpetuated for over eighty years. After all, it was too good to ignore: "scholarship in a padded cell", as the oh-so-sophisticated journalism of the *Pall Mall Gazette* put it. Indeed, the myth was even accepted in both K.M. Elisabeth Murray's 1977 biography of her grandfather, *Caught in the Web of Words*, and Jonathon Green's 1996 history of lexicography, *Chasing the Sun*.

Only one person in England, Elizabeth Knowles, an OUP editor, seems ever seriously to have looked into the story. During the 1990s she took pains to seek out a definitive account of the Murray-Minor first meeting. Her findings were published in the academic quarterly journal *Dictionaries*.

So what was the truth? First, some background.

William Chester Minor (1834-1920), was born in Sri Lanka of American parents and after graduation from Yale Medical School in 1863 joined the Union Army at the height of the Civil War as a surgeon, a commission that would unnerve him badly. By 1868 there were signs that his mind was going, and having had some treatment in a Washington asylum he was retired from the Army "incapacitated by causes arising in the line of duty". In 1872, while

*Don't worry if you're a kleptomaniac;  
you can always take something for it.*  
Anonymous

*Like all young men I set out to  
be a genius, but mercifully  
laughter intervened.*  
Lawrence Durrell

*There cannot be a crisis next week.  
My schedule is already full.*  
Henry Kissinger

## Quintessential Quirky Quotes

*Basically my wife was immature.  
I'd be at home in the bath and  
she'd come in and sink my boats.*  
Woody Allen

*It took me fifteen years to discover  
that I had no talent for writing, but I  
couldn't give up because by that time  
I was too famous.*  
Robert Benchley

It's intriguing, isn't it, how sometimes a work is published with different titles in the British Commonwealth and the United States? I won't attempt to account for the respective national marketing psychologies of this practice (though I can guess), but several in the last couple of decades readily come to mind. One of Australian importance was *Schindler's Ark/List* by Thomas Keneally (1982). And now we have Winchester's 1998 biography of Dr. Minor. Here are the U.K. and U.S. details:

Simon Winchester, *The Surgeon of Crowthorne; a Tale of Murder, Madness and the Love of Words*. ISBN 0 670 87862 6. (U.K.)

Simon Winchester, *The Professor and the Madman; a Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*. ISBN 0 060 17596 6. (U.S.)

Whatever the marketing people want to call it, for me the sad yet uplifting story of William Chester Minor and his 20-year colleagueship with James Murray remains one of the compelling highlights of my reading over the past twelve months. I cannot but wholeheartedly recommend it, both to dedicated word lovers and also to readers genuinely empathic to *la condition humaine*.

Overwhelmingly, response to Winchester's biography has been

positive. In America and Australia particularly it has been remarkable best-seller. So much so, that there is even talk of a movie, perhaps to star Mel Gibson and Robin Williams. I wonder which part each will get.

To conclude, here are two quotes from the scores of glowing reviews the book has received.

Simon Winchester's "Tale of Murder, Madness and the Love of Words" is as much about the creation of the greatest of dictionaries as of Minor's part in creating it. Today's lexicographers could do a better job in one 20th the time, manipulating the immense computerised corpuses of language now available. That story, however, wouldn't be even one hundredth as fascinating. (Gordon Bilney, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6/2/99)

I found *The Professor and the Madman* both enthralling and moving, in its brilliant reconstruction of a most improbable event: the major contributions made to the great *Oxford English Dictionary* by a deeply delusional, incarcerated "madman", and the development of a true friendship between him and the editor of the *OED*. One sees here the redemptive potential of work and love in even the most deeply, "hopelessly", "psychotic". (Dr. Oliver Sacks, whose neurological cases have formed the basis of such well-known movies as *Awakenings* and *At First Sight*)

— Harlish Goop

on a trip to London (partly to visit John Ruskin) he shot and killed an innocent man, George Merrett, in the delusional belief that his victim was there to persecute him.

He was arrested, tried, found to be mad and sentenced to imprisonment (as "Patient 742") in Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane at Crowthorne, Berkshire, never to be released.

Now, homicide among liberal arts practitioners isn't confined to lexicography, you know. Take painting, for instance, and the case of artist Richard Dadd (1819-87). Once a promising young painter with formal training, in 1843 Dadd suffered a mental breakdown and killed his father by cutting his throat with a razor. Thereafter he was condemned to spend his life in English mental asylums, first for 20 years in Bedlam, then in Broadmoor. His imprisonment in Broadmoor overlapped part of that of Dr. Minor, for whom Dadd represented the one and only intellectual peer he would know in his 38 years there. (Minor painted too — he was a water-colourist). Richard Dadd is best remembered for the many meticulous fairy paintings he created while incarcerated.

Being an educated and wealthy man, Minor was allowed a pair of private rooms in Broadmoor, to

keep and add to his library of books and to paint his pictures. Soon he had amassed hundreds of volumes, chiefly from the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1880 he came across Murray's leaflet of the preceding year, *An Appeal to the English-speaking and English-reading Public*, perhaps inside a periodical or a book he had ordered. Almost certainly as a means of personal redemption, Minor resolved to start working as a reader for the Dictionary. In all, he contributed over 12,000 quotations — sometimes at the rate of over a hundred a week.

In time to come (1899) Murray would say, "so enormous have been Dr. Minor's contributions . . . that we could easily illustrate the last four centuries from his quotations alone".

And Murray's first meeting with Minor?

Ever since his first batch of quotations (probably sent in 1880), Minor had come to be regarded by Murray and his colleagues as unflagging, thorough and possessing great lexicographical skills. Yet with so much apparent leisure, why had he never travelled the mere forty miles from Crowthorne to Oxford (an hour by steam train) to meet those who were obviously relishing his thousands of quotations? Winchester writes:

The answer to the deepening mystery . . . was delivered to Doctor Murray by a passing scholar-librarian [Dr. Justin Winsor, librarian of Harvard College], who stopped by at the Scriptorium in 1889 to talk about more serious matters. In the course of a talk that ranged across the entire spectrum of lexicography, he made a chance reference to the Crowthorne doctor. How kind the good James Murray had evidently been to him, remarked the scholar . . .

"You have given great pleasure to Americans . . . by speaking as you do in your Preface of poor Dr. Minor" . . .

"Poor Dr. Minor? . . . What can you possibly mean?"

Once he had learned the facts about Minor's circumstances, it was only a matter of time before James Murray would decide to visit the word-infatuated convict. By then they had been corresponding on Dictionary matters for over a decade, and while during that period Murray had been aware of Minor's address ("Broadmoor, Crowthorne, Berkshire"), he had always assumed that he was a medical officer at that institution. Murray's considerate response to the news of Minor's unique status was typical of this God-loving Calvinist:

I was of course deeply affected by the story, but as Dr. Minor had never in the least alluded to himself or his position, all I could do was to write to him more respectfully and kindly than before, so as to show no notice of this

disclosure, which I feared might make some change in our relations.

After writing to Dr. Nicholson, the Broadmoor Governor, Murray arranged to meet Minor in January 1891. From then on, for twenty years, as well as corresponding regularly, they saw each other dozens of times — always at Broadmoor, of course, either walking in the grounds or else in Minor's cell.

As avid as his interest in dictionary making is, Winchester's central concern remains the life of William Chester Minor, which he narrates with much compassion. Some of the saga will be distasteful to some, but in my opinion nowhere is it sensationalised by Winchester. Not Minor's prodigious sexual appetite, which began at the age of 13, nor the horrors he underwent as a surgeon during the American Civil War (including the nasty part he was required to play in the punishment of a deserter in 1864). Not the paranoiac murder he committed in London and was convicted for. Not his ongoing delusions in Broadmoor, nor the grisly self-mutilation he perpetrated after 30 years of confinement . . . All are essential to our understanding of this irreparably disturbed man. In fact the mental illness aspects are covered so fully that, along with the two personal

and six lexicographical subject entries it has for the book, the Library of Congress catalogue even provides the following entry: "Psychiatric hospital patients — Great Britain — Biography".

Nevertheless, it goes without saying that the affectionate attention paid by Winchester to Minor's work for the *OED* is what has captured my own appreciation. Winchester is undeniably enthusiastic about the history of dictionaries and the paramount place the *Oxford* holds in that history, especially in the light of the inadequate dictionaries that had gone before.

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.

Winchester pays special attention to Minor's working methods, describing his neat, microscopic handwriting on quires of four unlined sheets folded to make a quire (an eight-page-thick booklet):

His work would win the admiration and awe of all who would later see it; even today the quires preserved in the dictionary archives are such as to make people gasp.

A great irony of Minor's case that Winchester has pointed out in interviews is this. Were he living today, being treated with modern

drugs for schizophrenia, the lexicographical outcome might have been quite different. The medicines would have dulled his madness but could well have dulled his genius also, and deprived the world of his wonderful contribution to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

There is much more in Winchester's book, too, including such details as Winston Churchill's role in Minor's eventual relocation in 1910 to an American asylum. To say nothing of the efforts Murray and his wife Ada made to help secure that transfer. Murray's relationship with Minor was such that he and Ada actually came to farewell the frail 76-year-old Minor the day he left, and even arranged for a formal photograph to be taken in the Broadmoor garden.

For the story of William Chester Minor is far from just that of an insane murderer. Sure, we can describe people by their mental state (paranoid schizophrenic). We can choose to pigeon-hole them by profession, too (doctor), or by hobbies (lexicography, painting) . . . But the hardest thing in biography is to get the balance right: one page of misleading emphasis and our subject is a caricature. Which question of emphasis brings me at last to the actual name of Winchester's book.