

a tale of murder, madness  
and the  
love  
of  
words



The  
Surgeon of  
Crowthorne

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SIMON WINCHESTER

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Simon Winchester was born and educated in England, has lived in Africa, India and China, and now lives in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts. Having reported from almost everywhere during more than thirty years as a foreign correspondent, he now contributes to a variety of American and British magazines and makes regular broadcasts for the BBC.

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**THE SURGEON OF CROWTHORNE**  
**A Tale of Murder, Madness and the *Oxford English Dictionary***

SIMON WINCHESTER

**PENGUIN BOOKS**

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

[www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com)

First published by Viking 1998

Published in Penguin Book 1999

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ISBN: 978-0-14-194204-9

To the memory of G. M.

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AN APPEAL  
TO THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING AND ENGLISH-READING PUBLIC  
TO READ BOOKS AND MAKE EXTRACTS FOR  
**THE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY'S**

NEW ENGLISH DICTIONARY.

IN November 1857, a paper was read before the Philological Society by Archbishop Trench, then Dean of Westminster, on 'Some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries,' which led to a resolution on the part of the Society to prepare a Supplement to the existing Dictionaries supplying these deficiencies. A very little work on this basis sufficed to show that to do anything effectual, not a mere Dictionary-Supplement, but a new Dictionary worthy of the English Language and of the present state of Philological Science, was the object to be aimed at. Accordingly, in January 1859, the Society issued their 'Proposal for the publication of a New English Dictionary,' in which the characteristics of the proposed work were explained, and an appeal made to the English and American public to assist in collecting the raw materials for the work, these materials consisting of quotations illustrating the use of English words by all writers of all ages and in all senses, each quotation being made on a uniform plan on a half-sheet of notepaper, that they might in due course be arranged and classified alphabetically and by meanings. This Appeal met with a generous response: some hundreds of volunteers began to read books, make quotations, and send in their slips to 'sub-editors,' who volunteered each to take charge of a letter or part of one, and by whom the slips were in turn further arranged, classified, and to some extent used as the basis of definitions and skeleton schemes of the meanings of words in preparation for the Dictionary. The editorship of the work as a whole was undertaken by the late Mr. Herbert Coleridge, whose lamented death on the very threshold of his work

An extract from the call to the contributors to what would eventually become the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

## Preface

**mysterious** (mɪˈstɪərɪəs), *a.* [f. L. *mystērium* MYSTERY<sup>1</sup> + OUS. Cf. F. *mystérieux*.]

1. Full of or fraught with mystery; wrapt in mystery; hidden from human knowledge or understanding; impossible or difficult to explain, solve, or discover; of obscure origin, nature, or purpose.

Popular myth has it that one of the most remarkable conversations in modern literary history took place on a cool and misty late autumn afternoon in 1896, in the small village of Crowthorne in Berkshire.

One of the parties to the colloquy was the formidable Dr James Murray, the then editor of what was later to be called the *Oxford English Dictionary*. On the day in question he had travelled fifty miles by train from Oxford to meet an enigmatic figure named Dr W. C. Minor, who was among the most prolific of the thousands of volunteer contributors whose labours lay at the core of the Dictionary's creation.

For very nearly twenty years beforehand these two men had corresponded regularly about the finer points of English lexicography. But they had never met. Minor seemed never willing or able to leave his home at Crowthorne, never willing to come to Oxford. He was unable to offer any kind of explanation, or do more than offer his regrets.

Murray, who himself was rarely free from the burdens of his work at his Scriptorium in Oxford, had none the less long dearly wished to see and to thank his mysterious and intriguing helper. And particularly so by the late 1890s, with the Dictionary now well on its way to being half completed: official honours were being showered down upon its creators, and Murray wanted to make sure that all of those involved – even men so apparently bashful as Minor – were recognized for the valuable work they had done. He decided he would pay a visit; and the myth that came to surround that visit goes something like this.

Once he had made up his mind to go, he telegraphed his intentions, adding that he would find it most convenient to take a train that arrived at