The Talk

As we inch our way toward the millennium, every form of media has become obsessed with creating lists of the best (and the worst) that civilization over the last 100 or 1,000 years has produced. The ranking of the 100 best books of twentieth century America (by a small panel of jurors with attitudes) created some controversy. Various magazines and newspapers have followed suit, citing as many lists as our categorical cravings require, a seemingly infinite number.

So why shouldn't English Journal have its own list of something? True, "something there is that doesn't love" a list, but that is only the case when you take one too seriously or impose it upon a curriculum. In the twenty-first century, I suspect that good lists will make good neighbors, a point of comparison, a way of relating to what we consider important. So let's create a list! If you wish to nominate your favorite novel, short story or poetry collection, drama, or work of nonfiction, submit it to me before December 31. You may e-mail me at jmanear@aol.com (before Y2K) or mail it to me at 1000 McNeilly Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15226. Please limit your nominations to ten total, indicating the title, author, and category for each. I will collate them and report back to you in late spring. Of course, you must hurry; time is running out.

About Books

The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary

Reviewed by William McSweeney
Sayville, New York

The anecdote is told of the driver whose car lost one of its tires—its lug nuts flying off in every direction—just outside an insane asylum. The driver, despairing of ever locating the lug nuts in the deep grass fringing the asylum, sat down, his back leaning against his car, a study in dejection.

"Hey!" came a voice from within the asylum's fenced grounds. The driver looked up at an inmate who, for his part, explained the method that the stranded driver should use to extricate himself.

"Remove one lug nut," he said, "from each of the other three tires. Use three to secure the fourth tire. Drive to a service station. There, buy enough lug nuts to restore the car to its former condition."

"Thanks," the driver said. "What the devil are you doing in an institution?"

"Mister," the inmate said, "I'm here cause I'm crazy—not stupid."

This anecdote bears on William Chester Minor, one of the two principle characters Simon Winchester profiles in The Professor and the Madman, his compelling study of the making of the Oxford English Dictionary. William Chester Minor: Crazy he was. Scion of an aristocratic New England family, Yale-educated medical doctor, retired US Army Captain, Minor, while on an extended visit to England, shot to death a stranger, George Merrett, on a London street. At his trial in 1872 Minor spoke of being fearful of Irishmen, who he said hid in the rafters of his lodgings and then molested him as he slept, and among whose numbers, he maintained, the dead man could be counted. Minor had been retired from the Army because of these selfsame delusions. The possible reason for these delusions—if "reason" can be said to apply—was multidimensional, complex, and at first blush seemingly remote. Minor's troubles were rooted in our Civil War, where, as a young man, he had served as a surgeon in 1863.

One of the punishments a deserter faced was the branding of the letter "D" into his face. One young Irishman, escorted back to headquarters from the barn where he had hidden during battle, was court-martialed, found guilty, and sentenced to a flogging by thirty lashes with a cat, his cheek thereafter to be seared with a branding iron. Who to perform the branding? Who else but Dr. Minor—the Yale, the aristocrat, the person new to battle.

Minor did as he was ordered, and soon thereafter his mind concocted a chain of events extending into an ever-darkening future: The luckless
deserter, who had suffered at Minor's hands, would one day return to his homeland, unfit to work due to his disfigurement and free to plot unnoticed against the English. The man, Minor was convinced, would spread word that Minor had thus betrayed the Hibernian cause; that Minor was and would always be a lifelong enemy of that cause; that Minor must be destroyed; that agents of destruction must be dispatched to America. Indeed, some years later, Minor now explained to the jury, those agents had arrived, had lately taken to hiding in the rafters of his lodgings, from which they descended each night to molest him. After deliberation the court required Minor to be detained in safe custody at the Asylum for the Criminally Insane, Broadmoor, "until her Majesty's pleasure be known."

Yes, crazy Minor was; stupid he wasn't. By virtue of his Army pension, Minor had the means to have his books shipped from America to Broadmoor. To this considerable library he added new volumes, ordered and shipped via mail from bookshops in England. He resumed hobbies long ignored—painting in watercolors, playing the flute. Soon he had effectively made his two cells into an amalgam of scholar's library, artist's garret, and musician's studio. Within an asylum he created an asylum.

During Minor's incarceration James Murray was selected by Oxford University's Delegates—to assume leadership of a venture begun some years earlier, the publication of the Oxford English Dictionary—a robust, democratic, all-encompassing inventory of the English language. Due to lack of direction and underfunding, the venture had lately seemed doomed to failure.

In Murray, the Oxford Delegates saw the man with the vision and drive needed to direct the venture, and, accordingly, they saw to it that money and cooperation were there for him. The principle cooperators, however, were volunteers. Via pamphlets, a call went out to all libraries and bookshops seeking the help of readers in a massive undertaking, one that would entail seventy years' labor and result in the publication in 1927 of twelve mighty volumes, containing the definitions of 415,000 words and 2,000,000 illustrative quotations.

Within one of the books sent to Minor from a London bookshop was an announcement setting forth what was expected of OED contributors. They were to set down a word's origin, discover and share with readers its first recorded use in our language, survey its use over the course of its existence, and by means of apt quotations embracing it, show how its sense had evolved, dramatically or subtly, over the years.

His keenness, his aptitude for work, could be exemplified by his response to the call for help as to the word "art." While a score of other contributors offered a sentence or two illustrative of the word, Minor enclosed no fewer than twenty-seven sentences. The dictionary team knew they had indeed made a rare find. And Minor's prodigiously—to the point where he contributed as many as twenty pages of work per day—continued unabated for the next twenty years, by which time he had sent to Murray some 10,000 pages, all of which had been responsive to requests, all of which proved useful.

What Murray had noticed in Minor was perhaps accounted for by the latter's duality of roles. Minor, the surgeon, believed in immediacy, in decisiveness, in the need for—no pun intended—definition, in the need for results. Minor, the murderer with the troubled conscience, possibly believed, however subconsciously, that he must patch the garment his behavior had rent, that he who had lessened society must now enhance it. He burned to make immediate amends.

Whatever his motivation, Minor found structure, and what peace he attained was coextensive with that structure. For his part, Murray gained a contributor whose entries numbered in the tens of thousands. Each man gained in this happy symbiosis. And ultimately, of course, the civilized world gained as well.

Their trajectories, alas, ended discordantly. Murray ascended to honor and a bit of glory; Minor descended into deeper madness and a humble grave in New Haven, Connecticut. Theirs is a fascinating story, well-written by Simon Winchester, as one would demand of someone whose subject is, after all, the furtherance of the King's English. In the telling of the production of a great book, Winchester has written a good one.