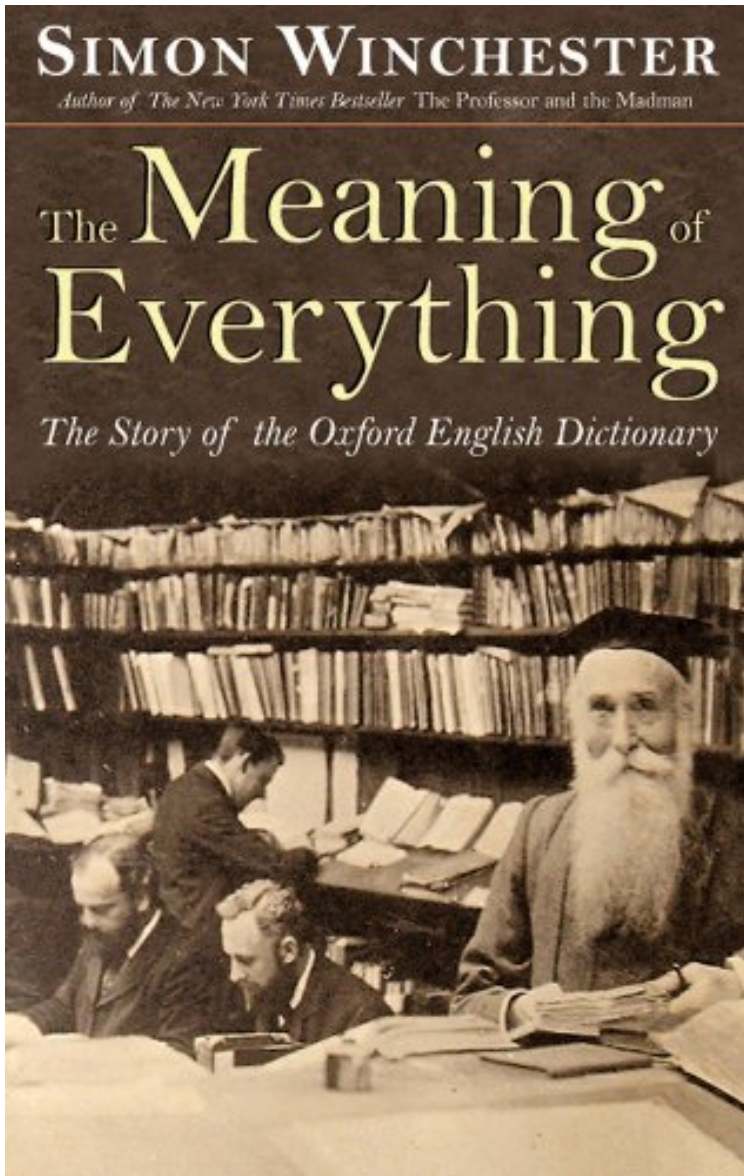


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# The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary



*Par Simon Winchester OBE  
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**Description :** Description du produitFrom the best-selling author of The Professor and the Madman, The Map That Changed the World, and Krakatoa comes a truly wonderful celebration of the English language and of its unrivaled treasure house, the Oxford English Dictionary. Writing with marvelous brio, Winchester first serves up a lightning history of the English language--"so vast, so sprawling, so wonderfully unwieldy"--and pays homage to the great dictionary makers, from "the irredeemably famous" Samuel Johnson to the "short, pale, smug and boastful" schoolmaster from New Hartford, Noah Webster. He then turns his unmatched talent for story-telling to the making of this most venerable of dictionaries. In this fast-paced

narrative, the reader will discover lively portraits of such key figures as the brilliant but tubercular first editor Herbert Coleridge (grandson of the poet), the colorful, boisterous Frederick Furnivall (who left the project in a shambles), and James Augustus Henry Murray, who spent a half-century bringing the project to fruition. Winchester lovingly describes the nuts-and-bolts of dictionary making--how unexpectedly tricky the dictionary entry for marzipan was, or how fraternity turned out so much longer and monkey so much more ancient than anticipated--and how bondmaid was left out completely, its slips found lurking under a pile of books long after the B-volume had gone to press. We visit the ugly corrugated iron structure that Murray grandly dubbed the Scriptorium--the Scrippy or the Shed, as locals called it--and meet some of the legion of volunteers, from Fitzedward Hall, a bitter hermit obsessively devoted to the OED, to W. C. Minor, whose story is one of dangerous madness, ineluctable sadness, and ultimate redemption. *The Meaning of Everything* is a scintillating account of the creation of the greatest monument ever erected to a living language. Simon Winchester's supple, vigorous prose illuminates this dauntingly ambitious project--a seventy-year odyssey to create the grandfather of all word-books, the world's unrivalled uber-dictionary.

'The greatest enterprise of its kind in history,' was the verdict of British prime minister Stanley Baldwin in June 1928 when *The Oxford English Dictionary* was finally published. With its 15,490 pages and nearly two million quotations, it was indeed a monumental achievement, gleaned from the efforts of hundreds of ordinary and extraordinary people who made it their mission to catalogue the English language in its entirety. In *The Meaning of Everything*, Simon Winchester celebrates this remarkable feat, and the fascinating characters who played such a vital part in its execution, from the colourful Frederick Furnivall, cheerful promoter of an all-female sculling crew, to James Murray, self-educated son of a draper, who spent half a century guiding the project towards fruition. Along the way we learn which dictionary editor became the inspiration for Kenneth Grahame's Ratty in *The Wind in the Willows*, and why Tolkien found it so hard to define 'walrus'. Written by the bestselling author of *The Surgeon of Crowthorne* and *The Map That Changed the World*, *The Meaning of Everything* is an enthralling account of the creation of the world's greatest dictionary. Ask a logophile or crossword-puzzle addict what the holiest of holy reference works might be, and you're almost certain to receive a three-letter acronym in reply: the OED. *The Meaning of Everything* is its story. Now in 20 volumes and still growing, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is an astounding monument, one that, like the Great Wall and the Roman Forum, seems to have been around forever. But, writes the always interesting explorer Simon Winchester in, it took decades--and considerable sums of money--to bring it into being. The Scottish autodidact James Augustus Henry Murray, surrounded by a small army of underpaid and overworked helpers, laboured over it for more than half a century, seeing into print "a total of 227,779,589 letters and numbers, occupying fully 178 miles of type" that brought the elusive histories of words such as walrus (courtesy of JRR Tolkien) and cow ("the female of any bovine animal", courtesy of Murray himself) into sharp relief. The making of the great dictionary over the years and decades seems an unlikely topic for a sometimes romantic, sometimes suspenseful tale, but Winchester delivers just that. Those who cherish words will find it a constant pleasure. --Gregory McNamee From *Publishers Weekly* With his usual winning blend of scholarship and accessible, skillfully paced narrative, Winchester (*Krakatoa*) returns to the subject of his first bestseller, *The Professor and the Madman*, to tell the eventful, personality-filled history of the definitive English dictionary. He emphasizes that the OED project began in 1857 as an attempt to correct the deficiencies of existing dictionaries, such as Dr. Samuel Johnson's. Winchester opens with an entertaining and informative examination of the development of the English language and pre-OED efforts. The originators of the OED thought the project would take perhaps a decade; it actually took 71 years, and Winchester explores why. An early editor, Frederick Furnivall, was completely disorganized (one sack of paperwork he shipped to his successor, James Murray, contained a family of mice). Murray in turn faced obstacles from Oxford University Press, which initially wanted to cut costs at the expense of quality. Winchester stresses the immensity and difficulties of the project, which required hundreds of volunteer readers and assistants (including J.R.R. Tolkien) to create and organize millions of documents: the word bondmaid was left out of the first edition because its paperwork was lost. Winchester successfully brings readers inside the day-to-day operations of the massive project and shows us the unrelenting passion of people such as Murray and his overworked, underpaid staff who, in the end, succeeded magnificently. Winchester's book will be required reading for word mavens and anyone interested

in the history of our marvelous, ever-changing language. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.