
**THE MEANING OF EVERYTHING:
*The Story of the Oxford
English Dictionary.***

By Simon Winchester. Oxford Univ.
Press. 360 pp. \$25

Admirers of Simon Winchester's work will know that he has ventured onto this terrain before. In *The Professor and the Madman* (1998), known to British readers as *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*, he achieved bestsellerdom with an account of the peculiar working relationship between John Murray, editor of the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and William Chester Minor, a conscientious lexicographer who also happened to be an inmate of the asylum for the criminally insane at Broadmoor. Having told that very odd tale, Winchester now turns his attention to the making of the OED itself.

Ever since the success of Dava Sobel's navigational history *Longitude* (1995), the publishing world has been awash with all manner of ripping nonfiction yarns. It can't be long before some lucky author lands a million-dollar deal to write @: *The Symbol That Built the Internet*. But Winchester's unobtrusive erudition and droll turn of phrase set him apart from the rest of the journalistic pack.

Like *Longitude*, *The Meaning of Everything* is a story of extraordinary endurance. When the idea of compiling a definitive survey of the English language was first mooted at a meeting of the Philological Society in 1857, nobody can have realized quite how taxing an endeavor it would become. Even by the all-conquering standards of the Victorian era, the multivolume work would be a colossal project. Seventy years would pass before it was complete.

After all the optimism of the inaugural speeches, the researchers soon became mired in the Sisyphean task of collating what Murray later termed "the multitudinous ramifications of meaning." (As Winchester makes clear in his crisp overview of the dictionary maker's art, it was no coincidence that Dr. Johnson defined a lexicographer as "a harmless drudge.") In spite of the prodigious energy of the early overseers, the project soon fell far behind schedule. The staff—who were eventually augmented by volunteer readers around the globe—struggled to keep track of the thousands of paper slips

that formed the basis of the ever-expanding work in progress. One set of slips, abandoned by a contributor, eventually turned up in a stable in County Cavan, Ireland; another was found in a villa in Tuscany.

The advent of Murray, one of those near-mythical polymaths of a lost era, proved the turning point. The son of a linen draper, he was working as a schoolmaster when formally appointed editor in 1879. It was not long before he brought the chaotic venture back on track. Even so, he was not to live to see it to fruition; he died in 1915, 13 years before the final pages were handed to the printers.

Although Oxford University Press is the publisher of Winchester's book, the firm's reputation does not emerge unscathed. After signing up for the dictionary around the time of Murray's arrival, the company adopted a stingy approach to the finances. It took Murray enormous effort to convince the Victorian bean counters that the dictionary should be treated as a monument for the ages.

Even then, the relationship between publisher and editor was frequently uneasy. During one moment of frustration, Murray considered resigning and taking up one of the many professorships being dangled before him by American universities. There was, as Winchester dryly notes, a certain prescience to Murray's observation: "The future of English scholarship lies in the United States. The language is studied with an enthusiasm unknown here."

—CLIVE DAVIS

**THE ART OF BURNING BRIDGES:
*A Life of John O'Hara.***

By Geoffrey Wolff. Knopf. 373 pp. \$30

The epitaph on the gravestone of novelist John O'Hara was a postmortem provocation to his critics: "Better than anyone else, he told the truth about his time. He was a professional. He wrote honestly and well." It didn't help that the words were his own.

O'Hara (1905–70) was the son of a prominent Irish physician in the coal-wealthy town of Pottsville, Pennsylvania (Gibbsville in his fiction). He was raised Catholic when Protestant was the socially preferable thing to be. A change in the family's fortunes kept him from attending Yale, and he never got over the exclusion. And he was a sucker all his life for the