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'World' wonder

Simon Winchester scopes out another quirky character: the guy who made the first map

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Author Simon Winchester shot to fame with "The Professor and the Madman," a gripping little book about the lunatic American murderer who played a vital role in the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary. The book became an acclaimed and unlikely best-seller all over the world.

Now, the 57-year-old writer is shining a light on William Smith, the 19th-century British engineer who pioneered the field of geology by creating the world's first geological map.

In "The Map That Changed the World," Winchester shows the unwavering, working-class Smith going bankrupt in the process, only to watch upper-class twits who didn't know a strata from a snuff box plagiarize his life's work and claim it for their own.

It's another entertaining bit of history from Winchester, who's also published travel books about the fading British Empire and other offbeat subjects.

But perhaps the best sto-

ries Winchester has to tell are about himself.

There's the mentor, John Morris, who encouraged Winchester to leave his dull job doing geological work in Uganda and become a journalist.

Winchester took his advice — even though they'd never met. They exchanged many letters over the years, and when the two finally did meet, Win-

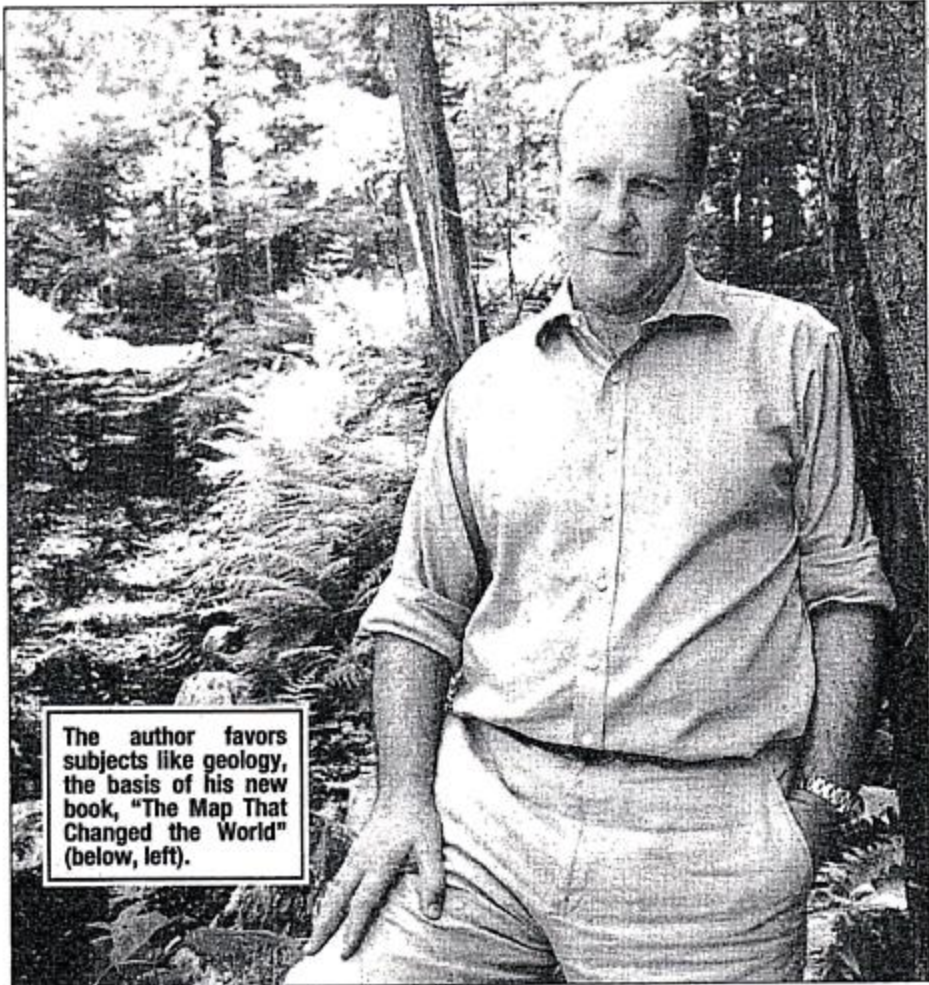
chester was astonished to discover that John had become Jan after a sex-change operation.

There's the rather severe British boarding school he attended as a child. The nuns there called all

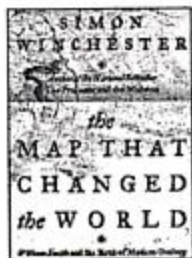
the children by number — never by their name. (Winchester was number 46.) When he meets old chums from those days, his first thought is invariably not "Oh, Bob Smith," but, "Oh, 6!"

And there's the time that interviewing the head of the government turned out not to be his ticket to fame and fortune as a journalist.

Winchester had just in-



The author favors subjects like geology, the basis of his new book, "The Map That Changed the World" (below, left).



HarperCollins
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terviewed British Prime Minister Harold Wilson. But when he tried to tell his editors at the newspaper where he worked about his coup, they told him they weren't interested and needed him to go to Belfast instead.

"That weekend, there was a huge riot, and I think six people were shot dead, and so it was the front-page lead story," recalls Winchester from his farm in Massachusetts. (Did I mention he also lives on an island in Scotland near a whirlpool he wrote about for National Geographic?)

"They said on Monday, 'That seemed to work rather well; stay there.' So I stayed for three years."

A peripatetic career followed, with Winchester covering Watergate in D.C., living in Hong Kong and ultimately going freelance so he could pursue

his varied interests. (He's also been married twice and now has an American girlfriend.)

That wide-ranging knowledge is on display in "The Map That Changed the World," which is bursting with tangents and asides, such as the footnote about the "colossal bore" Richard Warner, who published unappetizing books like "Diary of a Retired Country Parson, in Verse."

It's astonishing to find out that Winchester — like many journalists — writes so very quickly about so many different subjects.

"The Professor and the Madman" took six weeks to write," he says a bit abashedly about the book that has made his name. "This one didn't take that much longer."

Winchester's latest topic: the volcanic erup-

tion at Krakatoa in 1883. What interests him most is the worldwide impact of the event — not the explosion itself. Because telegraph wires finally crisscrossed the ocean, it was the first such natural disaster that was heard about all over the world shortly after it occurred.

He plans to take his time with this one — a concept that might have come from his moving onto that 65-acre farm in Massachusetts. The farm was his major splurge after hitting the jackpot with "The Professor and the Madman."

"Now I can slightly indulge my fantasies," admits Winchester, who always wanted to raise sheep and bees and will now do both.

When asked if he knows the first thing about farming, Winchester says simply and happily: "No. But I'm learning."