



The Wizard of Menlo Park: How Thomas Alva Edison Invented the Modern World

Randall E. Stross

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At the height of his fame Thomas Alva Edison was hailed as “the Napoleon of invention” and blazed in the public imagination as a virtual demigod. Newspapers proclaimed his genius in glowing personal profiles and quipped that “the doctor has been called” because the great man “has not invented anything since breakfast.” Starting with the first public demonstrations of the phonograph in 1878 and extending through the development of incandescent light, a power generation and distribution system to sustain it, and the first motion picture cameras—all achievements more astonishing in their time than we can easily grasp today—Edison’s name became emblematic of all the wonder and promise of the emerging age of technological marvels.

But as Randall Stross makes clear in this critical biography of the man who is arguably the most globally famous of all Americans, Thomas Edison’s greatest invention may have been his own celebrity. Edison was certainly a technical genius, but Stross excavates the man from layers of myth-making and separates his true achievements from his almost equally colossal failures. How much credit should Edison receive for the various inventions that have popularly been attributed to him—and how many of them resulted from both the inspiration and the perspiration of his rivals and even his own assistants? How much of Edison’s technical skill helped him overcome a lack of business acumen and feel for consumers’ wants and needs?

This bold reassessment of Edison’s life and career answers these and many other important questions while telling the story of how he came upon his most famous inventions as a young man and spent the remainder of his long life trying to conjure similar success. We also meet his partners and competitors, presidents and entertainers, his close friend Henry Ford, the wives who competed with his work for his attention, and the children who tried to thrive in his shadow—all providing a fuller view of Edison’s life and times than has ever been offered before. *The Wizard of Menlo Park* reveals not only how Edison worked, but how he managed his own fame, becoming the first great celebrity of the modern age.

The Wizard of Menlo Park: How Thomas Alva Edison Invented the Modern World Details

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Kristi Thielen says

Good, readable book about the inventor who played a role in the creation of the electric light, the phonograph and films, although the book candidly reveals that each of these inventions should be followed with an asterisk: Edison is confusedly thought to have been the sole originator on inventions when he in fact created a well-documented improvement on a pre-existing concept. (He also was happy to take credit for work done by subordinates in his laboratories.)

His lack of any business skill and financial savvy plus his strangely obstinate refusal to see his inventions for their true use (he was convinced the phonograph would be a businessman's dictating device) blighted his career and he is, in truth, fortunate to be remembered as fondly as he is, when you consider all the above AND his ugly anti-Semitism and indifference to family.

Warts and all, though, he remains a fascinating American worth reading about.

Lance says

I selected this book back at the start of last year when compiling my reading list for the year. The main motivation was to learn more about the man who founded GE since I worked for GE at that time. Although I have since left that employer, I can see a whole lot of GE in Thomas Edison, which is amazing given that he lived about a century ago.

For one, Edison was always more show than substance. Sure, he is credited with introducing a number of technological marvels to the world and his list of patents is very extensive. But the vast majority of those patents were for minor improvements on previous inventions. That characteristic is very GE; the company encourages patents on every little thing and then aggressively defends their intellectual property rights in court.

Because Edison was more show than substance, he was always trying to sell his inventions before he actually had them ready to sell. This trait is so GE. The company is always quick to claim market share by announcing a new product or service, even if the product or service is not yet available. I never understood that mentality, so it's probably best that I parted ways with the company.

Edison was a creative genius, and this book provides some clues for tapping into that same creativity which all of us have as a human endowment. But it also shows Edison as a man like the rest of us. Stross's portrayal of the Wizard of Menlo Park is engaging and authentic. It was a marvelous read, although it felt a little jilted at times. Stross decided to proceed more or less chronologically, but his treatment focuses on specific aspects of Edison's life, such as his technical marvels or his relationships with people. Because the treatment is not strictly chronological, the overall feel of the book is slightly jagged.

But that doesn't make the read less engaging or enjoyable. If you want a quick read that gives some depth into the history of one of this country's most iconic men, Stross delivers. Of all the stories in Edison's past, the one that interested me most was the one surrounding the development of the incandescent light bulb.

Edison first tried what others had tried, only to see that it wasn't going to work. All the while, he is selling his hype that he is on the verge of making a great discovery, that the project was so simple to accomplish that other inventors will beat themselves senseless once they see the solution. Yet in reality Edison was beating himself senseless to find a solution. We have all heard about how Edison tried thousands of different materials until he found the one that worked. What surprised me is that Edison continued trying other materials once he found one that would work.

Edison was also stubborn as a mule, and it was this propensity more than any other that made him a horrible businessman. He had a vision of centralized control and distribution (oh, still ever so much GE) for his ideas of direct current power production. DC current of course doesn't travel far, but he was so stubborn that he could not bring himself to adopt the better technology. And it was this stubbornness that saw him eventually alienated from GE, the company that he and his ideas were so instrumental in starting. What fascinates me is that so much of the way this man was is still present in the culture of GE today, even after about a century that he was ousted.

Overall, the book is great read and well worth the time for anyone with even a casual interest in learning more about Edison's life. Stross has done his homework; his notes to research into original documents is extensive, and he makes those references often. Yet his style is engaging and welcoming, making the read overall enjoyable. If you want to know more about Edison, you can't go wrong with this tome.

Omar says

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Will Herman says

Surprisingly, the book does more to disparage Edison than to praise him, IMO. It details how he failed as a commercial product creator and emphasizes how he was a brazen self-promoter of his real product, the Edison name, often at the expense of delivering decent products to his customers. For example, while Victrola and others agreed on a common and interchangeable recording format, Edison refused, just as he refused to adopt AC current when most systems were going that way. The same things were true for his motion picture setup. He believed that there wasn't a market for more than a handful of projected motion picture theaters in the country and balked at doing more than a single person box for watching.

The author also implies that Edison got way too much credit for his inventions and didn't give credit to the engineers who worked for him.

The author also comes back to his anti-Semitism frequently. While he wasn't as bad as Henry Ford, who admired and respected Edison completely, he was pretty bad in this regard.

Alasdair Reads says

Competent retelling of Edisons life and work, useful and insightful but not as much as I was hoping.

Joe says

Though Stross is a technology writer, this book focuses not so much on Edison's career as an inventor but on his celebrity and the effort "The Wizard of Menlo Park" put into managing his image; if we believe Stross, Edison spent more time maintaining his persona than he spent inventing, a problem that led to a wealth of failed or incomplete creations. In fact, this belief is a major drawback of the book. Stross diminishes a number of Edison's accomplishments based largely on the fact that a significant percentage of his creations never made money or failed all together. However, this is often the case with inventions. You invent forty or fifty things in the hopes that one has a life or that something will grow out of a less effective device; this seems like something a writer familiar with technology should know. In addition, Stross attributes Edison's fame more to his ability to work the press than the fact he ran the labs that invented the phonograph, and the electric light and a system to power it. Granted, Edison did work closely with his associates and likely took credit for their work in his many patent applications, but to ignore the fact that Edison directed much of this work is to ignore how R and D occurs. Edison was certainly no saint, but this book seems more intended to present a contrary take on a much revered figure than an accurate representation of a complex historical figure.

Rich Mulvey says

Essentially 300 pages describing how Edison was a really, really bad businessman. The book could have salvaged with some inspired writing, but the author's style is relatively dry and tedious.

Adam says

Interesting take. Some mention of but not a lot of focus on contributions of his employees. I had no idea he was a virulent anti-Semite.

Always fascinating to read about these mythical figures. Really shows why the Silicon Valley model of a business guy and a tech guy works... The skill sets do not often overlap.

Lauren says

So far, this is an absolutely fascinating read. Not only does this book cover Thomas Edison's history, but really delves into the culture of inventors during that time. I'm loving it.

James says

Decent book-- great job of separating the man from the myth. Probably used the word "hagiography" more often than any book not talking about medieval saints. The upshot (and maybe spoiler alert) is that Edison was cranky, short-sighted stubborn, opinionated. He had one huge success that created the illusion that he had many, many more.

It would be a great exercise to read this and Walter Isaacson's biography of Steve Jobs one after the other. I was struck with the similarity between the two men. Henry Ford called Edison "the world's greatest inventor and the world's worst businessman." That could have been said of Jobs as well, at least until Jobs' second act as the inventor of the iPod. Both of them were masters of manipulating the press, and both were victims of buying too much into their own press. Both of them did their best work on the cusp of a technological revolution; and as a result, both were given too much credit for initiating said revolution. Both of them were bested in business by a competitor who made up in business sense what he lacked in originality (George Westinghouse for Edison, Bill Gates for Jobs). Both led by intimidation. Neither shied away from taking credit for the accomplishments of their subordinates. They both had weird diets that they were convinced would keep them alive forever. The biggest difference is that Jobs did indeed have a second act when he realized how his technology could revolutionize personal entertainment. Edison almost did. He realized, too late, that the machine he invented for office dictation could also play music. But by the time he realized it, the competition had cornered the market in popular music.

Kate says

Normally I'm a big fan of biographies, but *The Wizard of Menlo Park* was painfully dull and repetitive. Thomas Edison was a towering genius, but there was no analysis of him, and no effort to engage the reader in Edison's personality or thought processes. The book failed him in favor of describing, at great length, the forgettable minutiae of his patents and rivalries. I didn't care about those things, and they got in the way of the information. There were indicators of a truly sociopathic, maybe psychotic, personality, but the book failed on that account. If Edison's lab existed today, he'd be arrested for his methods of electricity experiments. This made me wonder if Edison was truly unaware of what he was doing, or if he knew he had a destiny and cared nothing for common morality or decency. Again, the book lacked answers.

I'm still interested in learning about Thomas Edison, because I didn't get a satisfying reading experience. Eventually I'll find a better book.

Jean says

It has been many years since I have read about Thomas Alva Edison. When in elementary and high school I read all I could find about Thomas A. Edison, but in University I discovered Nicola Tesla and since then I read about Tesla. It was nice to revisit Edison.

I found this to be an entertaining biography. Stross approached this biography a bit differently than other biographers. Instead of writing about his technical career Stross presents him as a self-promoting celebrity

who knows how to control the power of media. Stross did a brief review of Edison's inventions but mostly he concentrated on the business aspect of Edison and his inventions. Edison was one of the first to use "branding." It is commonly used today by celebrities.

The book is well written and researched. Edison's inventions created our modern world. Stross did not cover much of this but covered his marketing skills. I do not think Stross was being negative about Edison and his inventions but was trying to reveal another aspect of the man. This should not be the first biography of Edison one should read; but if the reader is well versed about Edison this book will provide another aspect of the man.

I read this as an audiobook downloaded from Audible. Grover Gardner does an excellent job narrating the book. Gardner is an actor, voiceover artist and an award winning audiobook narrator. In fact, Gardner was chosen by Audiofile as a "golden Voice" narrator.

Glen says

I found the book insightful and well researched. I found the tone of the book, however, to be decidedly negative. It seems as though the author wanted to make sure the reader was well informed of all Edison's faults and failures and paint a clear picture about why many of his accolades we're undeserved. He even ended the book on a somewhat sour note by using an antecedent quote from Edison that had a negative overtone. Maybe I'm naive but when I read a biography about a notable person I want to be inspired. I want to learn how they overcame challenges and were able to carry on through difficult times. I didn't expect to have someone I've admired not just knocked off the pedestal but to have the pedestal torn down and torched in my mind as well. I really can't recommend this book.

Harold says

The Wizard of Menlo Park is a bit about Edison the inventor, and a lot about Edison the public celebrity. His is an interesting story, but if you want to learn what really made him tick you won't get it here. In fact, it isn't clear how much he invented. Edison was part inventor, and part master of invention, in the sense that he created a major laboratory of invention, of which he was the maestro, but there were a lot of members in the orchestra. But the book, unfortunately, is more by the numbers than inventive.

If you want a really compelling book which covers some of the same territory (although not the invention of the phonograph or motion picture) I strongly recommend Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse, and the Race to Electrify the World by Jill Jonnes.

Henrik Haapala says

"The three great essentials to achieve anything worth while are: Hard work, Stick-to-itiveness, and Common sense."

"Be courageous. I have seen many depressions in business. Always America has emerged from these stronger and more prosperous. Be brave as your fathers before you. Have faith! Go forward!"

/Edison

Utility = success

Anything that doesn't sell I don't want to invent

Total 1093 patents with help of assistants and many for slight variations of electric light, power, phonographs and recording.

Work: "For the last ten years, Johnson said in 1878, Edison had averaged 18 hours a day at his desk. So immersed in works demands he does not go home for days, either to eat or sleep, even though his house was only a few steps away." 66

"Well I worked 122 hours in six days last week, hence I must feel fine - and do. The next month, he had a time clock installed in the laboratory, which permitted him to document his hours and call in reporters to let the world know that he outworked everyone. The first week the clock was in operation, Edison logged 95 hours and 49 minutes, or as one story put it, "nearly twice as long as any of his 5000 employees who enjoyed an 8 hour day." His recorded hours would have been longer had he been able to log in properly on the first day, as he had been working all night and left the building at 8:15 AM." 229

Ford: "At one point, a young man stepped up to Ford to introduce himself and ask for Fords recipe for success. "Work" was Fords not-so-helpful answer." 245
