



# **The Age of Edison: Electric Light and the Invention of Modern America (Penguin History American Life)**

*Ernest Freeberg*

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The late nineteenth century was a period of explosive technological creativity, but arguably the most important invention of all was Thomas Edison's incandescent lightbulb. Unveiled in his Menlo Park, New Jersey, laboratory in 1879, the lightbulb overwhelmed the American public with the sense of the birth of a new age. More than any other invention, the electric light marked the arrival of modernity.

The lightbulb became a catalyst for the nation's transformation from a rural to an urban-dominated culture. City streetlights defined zones between rich and poor, and the electrical grid sharpened the line between town and country. "Bright lights" meant "big city." Like moths to a flame, millions of Americans migrated to urban centers in these decades, leaving behind the shadow of candle and kerosene lamp in favor of the exciting brilliance of the urban streetscape.

*The Age of Edison* places the story of Edison's invention in the context of a technological revolution that transformed America and Europe in these decades. Edison and his fellow inventors emerged from a culture shaped by broad public education, a lively popular press that took an interest in science and technology, and an American patent system that encouraged innovation and democratized the benefits of invention. And in the end, as Freeberg shows, Edison's greatest invention was not any single technology, but rather his reinvention of the process itself. At Menlo Park he gathered the combination of capital, scientific training, and engineering skill that would evolve into the modern research and development laboratory. His revolutionary electrical grid not only broke the stronghold of gas companies, but also ushered in an era when strong, clear light could become accessible to everyone.

In *The Age of Edison*, Freeberg weaves a narrative that reaches from Coney Island and Broadway to the tiniest towns of rural America, tracing the progress of electric light through the reactions of everyone who saw it. It is a quintessentially American story of ingenuity, ambition, and possibility, in which the greater forces of progress and change are made visible by one of our most humble and ubiquitous objects.

## **The Age of Edison: Electric Light and the Invention of Modern America (Penguin History American Life) Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Age of Edison: Electric Light and the Invention of Modern America (Penguin History American Life) for online ebook**

### **Chris says**

An interesting read on the social history of electric lighting. The technology is so obvious now that we forget, or don't realize, that its introduction created a frenzy of adoption exactly like that of the iPhone today, for example. It only took only about five years before most American cities had replaced darkness and feeble gas lamps with the new arc lighting. We think we are somehow special today in our ability to create and consume the "new," but it was exactly the same in the 1880's, and the vast social change that resulted then offers significant lessons for technologists, sociologists and consumers of today, if anyone cares to notice.

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### **Tanya Ehrler says**

This book needed to be edited/shortened considerably.  
What could have been an interesting 2-3 hour read, was drug out for 10 hours.  
Excruciating.

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### **Harold says**

This book is well named. And misleading. It is not a book about Edison. Rather it is about the age of Edison, and thereafter. It is simply a book about the history of the change that Electric Light Bulbs wrought on America.

This book tells almost nothing about individual people, including Edison. It passes lightly over the invention of the lightbulb. It mentions briefly the race between AC and DC current and the problems and politics in the creation of electric grids. It is more interested in the bulb rising in the east and spreading its light across the country.

This book tells you that the invention of the light bulb was profound, but sheds very little light.

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### **Sarah Coller says**

From Amazon: "The late nineteenth century was a period of explosive technological creativity, but more than any other invention, Thomas Edison's incandescent light bulb marked the arrival of modernity, transforming its inventor into a mythic figure and avatar of an era. In *The Age of Edison*, award-winning author and historian Ernest Freeberg weaves a narrative that reaches from Coney Island and Broadway to the tiniest towns of rural America, tracing the progress of electric light through the reactions of everyone who saw it and capturing the wonder Edison's invention inspired. It is a quintessentially American story of ingenuity, ambition, and possibility in which the greater forces of progress and change are made by one of

our most humble and ubiquitous objects."

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. So much more than I thought I would...and so much that I could probably start from the beginning right now and read the whole thing through again. There was so much to learn and imagine and I know I missed so much being distracted by surgery and a move. I will definitely be keeping it in my collection to go back to from time to time.

The advent of electric lights had such an amazing effect on society. It changed people's sleep patterns, thus changing their entire routines, traditions, and family and social lives. It served to further differentiate between social statuses. It made an impact in so many ways that I never could have imagined.

I thought it was interesting that so many species of birds and bugs were discovered as they were found dead at the base of street lights in the mornings. The idea of "electro" hunting and fishing was also interesting.

I was also surprised by how late into the 20th century electricity became common in middle-class homes. Less than 15% of homes were wired for electricity in 1910---and only 70% by 1930.

Other interesting bits:

Pg. 267: "Self-evident today, the proper use of an incandescent lamp is a social practice that, according to one electrician, was misunderstood by 99 percent of Americans in the early twentieth century. Why pay so much for electric light, these customers surely wondered, only to hide it behind a shade or to place it out of the line of sight... Such an idea must have seemed like the scheme of unscrupulous electric-current salesmen eager to sell customers more light than they needed."

Pg. 283: "These changes in technology produced a corresponding change in the way middle-class American families interacted once the sun went down. Some complained that since family members felt less compelled to draw together each night around a common lamp, their bonds had weakened and the art of conversation had suffered. People talked less and read more, as cheaper books and more evening light encouraged the explosive growth of what people at the time called a new 'reading habit.'"

Lastly, I was compelled to ponder the last line of the book and wonder about the actual validity of this quote from Franklin Roosevelt: "Electricity is no longer a luxury, it is a definite necessity."

I wonder---how would our society get by if we no longer had access to electricity?

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### **Sarah says**

My dad collects Edison records and Edison record players. I grew up mostly associating Edison with his records and record players. I did know he invented the light bulb, but I did not know much more than that. I enjoyed reading about how he invented the light bulb. The best part of the book is learning how the early days of the light bulb changed people's lives. The book covers both the positive and negative impact that electric light had. The wires that were hastily put up on poles were very dangerous and people were injured or killed as a result. There was a lot that still had to be learned about how to safely use this new invention. I enjoyed how the book mentioned how the World's Fair in Chicago and the World's Fair in Buffalo used electric light. The author really did his research because he mentioned Barnes' diving elks and educated horse at the fair in Buffalo.

I read the Nook Book version of this book. I was very impressed with how well the images in the book showed up. They are very clear and I can see so much detail in each image. I highly recommend reading this book. We take for granted the light we have today. This book reminds us how much it has improved our lives by showing what type of lighting was used before the light bulb.

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### **Text Addict says**

A good synthesis of information about how electric light was invented, promoted, and extended to ever-larger segments of the American public. How people reacted to it - as either a menace or a panacea, and all points in between. The major personal and public safety issues involved. The canonization of Edison as a kind of secular saint of Progress. Very interesting, but rarely revelatory. A solid reference on a period and topic that needed one.

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### **Jill Hutchinson says**

It is hard to imagine living in a world without electricity, especially electric light. But do we ever think about how the first unveiling of this marvel was received by the public. It seemed like magic or the devil's work but regardless it fascinated all who saw it and experienced illumination at night beyond the light of the moon.

This book has chapters that are extremely interesting and others that are deadly boring.....very inconsistent. It is not a book about Thomas Edison but about how electricity changed the world, concentrating on the United States. It is almost a sociological treatise as the author examines the legal, aesthetic, and commercial aspects of the coming of the light, which is not exactly what I expected. Overall, it was a dry read but I finished it and did learn some interesting aspects of the patent and trust fights. This is definitely not a beach read!

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### **Melissa says**

I am ashamed to admit, but I had never really thought about a lot of this before. Edison invents the light bulb (sort of) but then the U.S. must get wired and ready to be lit up. Light pole makers didn't know what they were doing and these poles fell down and killed people. The electric companies didn't know what they were doing and the wires fell down and killed people. Electrical workers touched the wrong thing and fell into tangles of overhead wires. Sizzling for hours! How much light is too much light? Do you need street lights when it's a full moon? Why spend all this money on a light bulb to cover it up with a lamp shade? This was a great read about how Americans praised, shunned, experimented, and adopted the light bulb.

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### **Sara says**

easily 4 stars. Freeburg takes the scientific discussion of electricity and makes it very relevant to the amateur study of American history. very enjoyable and I learned a lot!

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### **Ernst says**

The book is about 2/3 about the years between 1879, when Edison invented his version of the light bulb, and 1892 when Edison sold out his interest to General Electric which, using alternating current (which Edison never understood) took over as the major player in American electricity. The last 1/3 covers the years up until 1929 when, just weeks before the stock market crash, President Hoover joined other luminaries at Menlo Park to honor Edison on the fiftieth anniversary of his most famous invention.

The book raises many questions about the tradeoffs between the ruthless exploitation of worker safety and the killing of many ordinary citizens versus the benefits of being an electrified country so quickly. Also, even by 1929, the markets had found no way to provide electricity to rural areas -- it took the New Deal and the TVA to get that accomplished. Quick paced and fascinating to read.

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### **Bandit says**

There are so many puns one can use in this review. And frankly I don't know if I needed this much information on the subject, but it was an interesting and pleasantly lively (for nonfiction) account of how the invention of electricity and its gradual introduction into the world has changed the society. Not much information here on Edison per se (no bio), this isn't Edison and His Age. This book talks about other inventors who didn't get to share in the recognition (pun opportunity not taken) or fell into the dark abyss of obscurity (another one), about larger than life expositions, socioeconomical politics of implementing revolutionary new technology, logistics, practical applications, wide eye acceptance and staunch reluctance/refusal to embrace the light, etc. Informative and accessible read.

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### **Shannon Bench says**

First of all, I'd like to let you know that I'm a picky reader. I like fantasy, and not just any fantasy, either. It has to be EPIC fantasy for me to even consider reading it for my own leisure. However, this book was assigned to me by a professor and so, to the reading nook I went. All too eager to learn about Edison and his time, about the light bulb and its coming into existence. You know what? I was truly excited for it, too. I love history, always found it fascinating, and after the prologue, I thought, "This book isn't half bad for a textbook." Then I started to read the first chapter... and then the second... and again into the third when I finally gave up.

Is it just me, or do books like this one tend to sound like an enormously long version of an essay? The direct quotes, the citations, the introduction and concluding statements, the move back and forth from one time to another. Why can't books be more interesting as well as actually educational. Just because this stuff happened in the 19th century doesn't mean you can't make it interesting and "story-like" instead of a boring lecture about facts upon facts.

I always hoped that one day I would pick up a text and open the book to find that there was a singular character, maybe even an omniscient one, that told the story of a time or of a person's life. But no, never has that ever happened and I have barely any hope left that it ever will. Intellectual books could be like that, right? They have all the possibility to be like that, but when a writer with no interest in the "story" begins to write a book, I feel that they default to the basics of education: the dreaded essay format. I get that it works, but I still don't find it interesting. At the very least, when writing an essay, I try to add a bit of my own

character or even some word-flare that peaks the interest of the reader, making the essay more fun instead of just factual.

Oh, when the day comes that I pick up a textbook and I enter a story that is both exciting and educational. The day will come, at least I hope so, and when it does, I will burn this book and say good riddance.

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### **Michael Kearney says**

Well written but lacked soul. It was just the basic facts about some of the story of how electric lights crept into American life.

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### **John Harder says**

There is a reason that the image of person with a light bulb over his head is the universal sign of someone with a bright idea. This is odd when arguably man's greatest invention is beer. Yet we rarely illustrate brilliance by hovering a Schlitz can over a beaming countenance. Why? Well light and electric power helps us overcome adversity and the environment, beer just helps us to endure it.

The Age of Edison isn't really about Edison, though he plays a large factor. It is more about the transformation of America and the effect of being able to see after 8:00 PM. After a rash of divorces when spouses saw each other for the first time, ultimately all the effects were positive. This did not keep the doom and gloom group (think Al Gore) from prophesying that electric light would bring about moral degeneracy (people staying out past dark), physical danger (some thought pumping noxious and flammable gas light was safer than electricity) and disintegration of the family (families would not longer gather about the flicking kerosene flame and talk). True the ability to keep late hours has its drawbacks. Nothing wholesome ever happens after 10:00 and if by 1:00 AM you are not at home there is a 90% likelihood that you are doing something of which your mother would not approve...but on a whole I think we must all agree light is good – it says so right in Genesis 1:4.

This is a wonderful snapshot of a short and highly transformative period of history.

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### **Amanda says**

This was a tough one to get through. It took me almost two months to read, and that was in large part due to the writing style. I actually love reading nonfiction historical books, and find anything related to American history fascinating so this sounded like a great read. Unfortunately the writing style is very stiff, and I found many of the chapters repetitive. I feel like it could have been half as long and still have gotten the point across. I also didn't appreciate how the story was bookended with jabs at Thomas Edison's contributions to the invention of the light bulb. The author just spent 300 pages telling us how other people contributed to its progress and then has to remind readers that it wasn't all Edison. It felt a little bitter.

Still, there was a lot of interesting backstory about electricity and how it slowly began to be incorporated into American society. I also appreciated how the author demonstrated the different approaches to invention by

Americans versus Europeans. I still think it is a fascinating topic but wish that some more editing had happened to shorten and tighten up the book.

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