



edison

The Father of Invention

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By the time he died in 1931, Thomas Alva Edison was one of the most famous men in the world. The holder of more patents than any other inventor in history, Edison had amassed a fortune and achieved glory as the genius behind such revolutionary inventions as sound recording, motion pictures, and electric light. Born on the threshold of America's burgeoning industrial empire, Edison's curiosity led him to its cutting edge—and to the fascination with telegraphy that set him on his course through life. With just three months of formal schooling, he took on one seemingly impossible technical challenge after another, and through intuition, persistence, and a unique team approach to innovation, invariably solved it, catapulting himself to worldwide fame by the age of thirty-one.

Driven and intensely competitive, Edison was often neglectful in his private life and could be ruthless in business. His first wife died of a morphine overdose at the age of twenty-nine; his closest friendship ended with a bitter and irrevocable rupture. *Edison* explores the complex alchemy that accounts for the enduring celebrity of America's most famous inventor, offering new perspectives on the man and his milieu, and illuminating not only the true nature of invention, but its role in turn-of-the-century America's rush into the future.

Born in 1847 and raised in Port Huron, Michigan, Edison had a precocious curiosity and a natural scientific acuity. By fifteen, he was working as a telegraph operator, and at twenty-two, he moved to New York to pursue a career as an inventor, a business lucrative enough to finance his dream laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey.

With a group of like-minded young men, Edison had an audacious goal: to create one minor invention every ten days and a major one every month. The thrill of invention was in the air; the recent 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia had introduced enthralled visitors to such amazing devices as the elevator and Alexander Graham Bell's telephone. In a matter of months, Edison and his team designed a device that trumped Bell's—a "carbon button transmitter" that carried sound over much larger distances and turned the telephone into a commercially viable device. In the process, Edison stumbled upon the invention of the phonograph—the first device to record sound and play it back.

The phonograph made Edison an overnight sensation, but he was restless, and soon on to the next big thing: devising a way to bring electric light indoors. Although arc lighting for outdoor spaces was already available, no one had been able to create a long-lasting light bulb and the electrical power system necessary to make it viable.

Edison finally solved the challenge with a high-vacuum bulb and a filament of carbonized cotton thread, and on New Year's Eve 1879, he invited the public to Menlo Park for the unveiling of his light. For the crowds who tramped through the snowy dark that night and saw the lab glowing in the distance, it was clear a miraculous new era had dawned. Less than three years later, Edison lit up lower Manhattan with his electrical power grid.

By 1888, the electrification of the country was well underway, and Edison's electrical empire was vast and growing. But competition was fierce, and his rivals' embrace of cheaper, more efficient AC current threatened to make his own DC system obsolete. Edison waged a ruthless campaign to discredit his competitors and convince the public that AC was unsafe, but he lost the war. In the end, Edison's backers insisted on a merger with a rival AC provider, and "Edison General Electric" became known simply as "General Electric."

When Edison died on October 18, 1931, he lay in state for two days in the library of his West Orange complex, as thousands lined up to pay their final respects. On the third night, at the request of President Herbert Hoover, radio listeners across the country switched off their lights as a reminder of what life would have been like without Edison.

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