



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

By Randall E. Stross

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## **The Wizard of Menlo Park: How Thomas Alva Edison Invented the Modern World** By Randall E. Stross

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.

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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

In this entertaining biography, Stross (eBoys: The First Inside Account of Venture Capitalists at Work) approaches the life of Edison from an atypical angle: where scores of other biographers have focused on the genius's technical career, Stross presents Edison as the first self-conscious celebrity, a man deeply aware of the media's power and who wasn't afraid to use "the press's hunger for more sensational discoveries for his own ends." Though branding is now second-nature for famous people (and their handlers), Stross asserts that Edison launched the first successful branding campaign—an achievement arguably further ahead of its time than much of his technical output—by embracing the title "Wizard of Menlo Park," which was coined by a reporter during Edison's brief stay in that New Jersey town. With preternatural skill in image-management, Edison became indistinguishable from his moniker, encapsulating perfectly the air of mystery and wisdom he cultivated throughout his life, for both himself and his "invention factory," which "seemed capable of mastering anything." Stross's clear-eyed biography will show readers why, even at the end of the 20th century, Edison remains, outside the U.S., the best-known American ever.

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#### From Booklist

Biographies abound of inventor Thomas Edison, so Stross distinctively positions his book under the theme of Edison's celebrity. The publicity apparatus of Edison's day, quaint compared with today's multimedia conduits to the public and its tabloid appetites, still served to elevate Edison into the realm of the famous. Stross, who frequently writes about contemporary techno-idols (*Steve Jobs and the Next Big Thing*, 1993), recounts the onset of Edison's celebrity with several articles published in 1877-78 about his phonograph. Soon trainloads of curiosity seekers, from hustlers to those already famous, such as actress Sarah Bernhardt, descended on Edison's laboratory to gawk at the inventor. With this loss of privacy, Edison learned the difficulty of controlling one's fame. As Stross' narrative explains, Edison attempted to exploit his name to attract attention to his business projects and succumbed to other temptations, such as pontificating on subjects outside his expertise--executions by electrocution, for example. Stross' Edison, capitalizing on his prominence but coping with the importunities of the multitude, becomes a human-scaled character grasping the honeyed thorns of fame. *Gilbert Taylor*

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#### Review

ÓReading THE WIZARD OF MENLO PARK was a stark reminder of how much we owe Thomas Edison. Historian Randy Stross deserves high praise for bringing the great innovatorÓs multi-faceted career into keen focus. This is a truly remarkable book.Ó

--Douglas Brinkley, Professor of History at Tulane University and author of WHEELS FOR THE WORLD: HENRY FORD, HIS COMPANY AND A CENTURY OF PROGRESS

"As he demonstrated in his earlier examinations of the creative lives of Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, organizational historian Randy Stross once again reveals a keen eye for the hidden details and forgotten nuances in the lives of great men. His recreation of the life and achievements of Thomas Edison will become the standard reference to which all historians will turn for years to come. And yet the book is written with an eye for detail and a flair for observation that reads more like a great mystery novel than your standard biography. A must read!"

---Roderick Kramer, William R. Kimball Professor of Organizational Behavior, Stanford Business School, Stanford University

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