

Edison**Edmund Morris****New York: Random House, 2019****800 pages****ISBN: 978-0812993110****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v6i2.217>**

Having published the final volume of his award-winning biography of Theodore Roosevelt, Edmund Morris was casting about for another life to write. His agent suggested Thomas Edison, another man of action, whose interests and activities have proved too various and voluminous to squeeze into any one-volume biography. Morris took up the suggestion and produced *Edison*, the most comprehensive biography of the inventor in more than a decade. Along the way, he plunged into the more than five million archival documents at the Edison National Historic Park in West Orange and rifled through the digital resources on the Thomas A. Edison Papers website.

In *Edison*, Morris presents a man whose life was made up of long stretches of manic genius punctuated by short periods of exhaustion and collapse, a man who was never so alive as when sketching new ideas in his notebook or seeing them realized on his workbench. These were the arenas in which Edison excelled, and wherever a technological challenge arose, he proved indefatigable. Other aspects of life bored him, and this explains his neglectful attitude towards family, his relative indifference to suffering, and his marginal competence as a businessman. Morris allows us to see all of these aspects of Edison but pays special attention to what made the man a titan in the eyes of contemporaries—his manifold contributions to modernity.

It had always been Morris's ambition to innovate the writing of biography, an effort he began with *Dutch*, his life of Ronald Reagan. For that book, he created a fictional character who accompanies Reagan from boyhood to the presidency. This innovation drew sharp criticism. And so has Morris's approach with *Edison*, in which he narrates the life in reverse, from the inventor's death in Llewellyn Park, NJ, in 1931 to his birth in Milan, Ohio, in 1847. The question is: why,

besides novelty, did Morris do this? Had he lived, he might have given us his answer. But he died suddenly of a stroke in May 2019, leaving us with only conjectures, one of which is that by writing the life backwards he is able to begin with a retrospective of the world-transformative achievements of the “Wizard of Menlo Park.” This is perhaps necessary today, when Edison’s reputation is under rather ill-informed attack in popular media. Thus, Morris is able to remind us at the book’s start that obituary writers in 1931 “lacked enough column inches to summarize the one thousand and ninety-three machines, systems, processes, and phenomena patented by Edison.”

Innovations in biography aside, Morris's more traditional focus on what makes Edison one of the great figures in all of history proves the strength of this work. Rather than expatiate on popular myths, such as the alleged antagonism with Nikola Tesla, Morris dismisses them curtly and moves on to what really interests him—Edison’s mind and personality. And it is safe to say that no one has illuminated either more incandescently. In the early chapters, for instance, Edison emerges as a wise, if gruff, old man, but one who is thoroughly American—exhibiting marvelous stick-to-it-iveness and optimism, as well as a contrarian’s scorn for authority. In Morris’s portrayal, Edison is full of camaraderie for those who shared his workbenches and for fellow industrialists who revered him, but is devoid of love for those closest to him. He simply “did not return affection,” says Morris, and “Even when alerted to the pain, or loneliness, or shame, or other neuroses of people who were less successful than himself, he seemed puzzled that they did not cheer themselves up by embarking on some bold venture, as he was about to do.” Edison, though, *was* a passionate man. But his passion, as Morris makes clear, was reserved for satisfying his overweening curiosity and for creatively solving technical problems that proved daunting to others. When alone, the ideas poured out of him in long notebook entries and patent caveats. At such times of inspiration, Edison was, says Morris, “swept up into a fever of excitement.”

During one such period of manic inspiration, Edison created a revolution in recorded sound as well as the carbon button that made long-distance telephony possible. But he was, writes Morris, “even more legendary for his creation of the long-burning incandescent lightbulb accompanied by two hundred and sixty-three other patents in illuminating technology” that transformed human life world-wide. The adjective “long- burning” is operative here. There were some twenty-one incandescent bulbs “invented” before Edison's. But each of them burned for less than a minute. Those of his closest competitors were the result either of espionage or imitating Edison's patent and claiming precedence. As Morris demonstrates, Edison's discovery and improvement of the carbon filament allowed him to create a lamp that burned for more than 600 hours—one economical enough to compete with candles, whale oil, and gas.

As is the case with any biography, Morris's treatment of Edison's life is not without flaws. The informed reader may quibble about a few minor omissions and misinterpretations. And then there is the occasional overstatement. Morris says, for example, that Edison's “entire career had been a drive toward modernity,” a claim belied by the inventor's tendency to get stuck in cul-de-sacs of his own devising, such as direct current, wax-cylinder recording, and the cultivation of a managerial style that was quaintly mid-nineteenth-century well into the twentieth.

Despite these hiccups and a formal structure that sometimes seems like looking into the wrong end of a telescope, Morris gets more right than not, which is all the more impressive when one considers that he had to gain some degree of mastery over so many technical concepts in order to elucidate Edison's innovations. In this regard, Morris seems to have been swept up by the same kind of insatiable curiosity that drove his subject. The result is an insightful account of Edison's life, carved out in Morris's inimitable and marble-smooth prose.

Daniel Weeks

Thomas A. Edison Papers, Rutgers University