

***Seduced by the Light: The Mina Miller Edison Story*****Alexandra Rimer****Essex, Connecticut: Lyons Press, 2023****342 pages****ISBN: 9781493069415****DOI: [10.14713/njs.v10i2.367](https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v10i2.367)**

*Seduced by the Light* is the first biography of Thomas Edison's second wife, Mina. The author, Alexandra Rimer, has worked as an editor for the Thomas A. Edison Papers at Rutgers University for almost 20 years. She knows this material thoroughly, and the story she tells is one of serious family dysfunction. Edison was a workaholic and a narcissist who had little time for his wife and children. Early hagiographic biographies of the "Wizard of Menlo Park" left out the miserable family relations, but more recent studies of Edison, such as Paul Israel's *Edison: A Life of Invention* (1998) or Edmund Morris's *Edison* (2019), have documented it pretty well. Although Rimer is not the first to tell this sad story, her biography of Mina Edison fleshes it out in excruciating detail.

When Edison's first wife, Mary, died suddenly in 1884, the 37-year-old inventor needed someone to manage his household and look after his three young children. Family friends introduced him to a series of prospective mates before he settled on Mina Miller, who had just turned 20 years old. Mina was the seventh of eleven children of Lewis and Mary Valinda Miller of Akron, Ohio. Her father was a successful inventor and industrialist and a founder of the celebrated Chautauqua, an adult education movement.

Transported to New Jersey, far from her supportive family in Ohio, Mina struggled to cope with a difficult husband and three stepchildren not much younger than herself. The newlyweds quickly proved to be horribly mismatched. In addition to the age disparity, they were intellectually and temperamentally incompatible. Mina was religious, fastidious, prudish, and emotionally

needy. Edison was agnostic, untidy, bumptious, and inaccessible. The workaholic Edison spent most of his time at his laboratory and factories, neglecting his young bride and growing family. Rimer does a fine job of depicting the family tensions, but she reserves most of her sympathy for Mina, married to a self-centered man. Though it was probably not much fun for Edison either, wed to a humorless stick-in-the-mud.

Mina also had a hand in the family dysfunction. She never warmed to her stepchildren. She viewed the two rambunctious boys, Tom Jr. and William, as troublemakers and soon shipped them off to a boarding school, where they were lonely and miserable. During holidays they were usually sent to Mina's parents. Edison's teenaged daughter, Marion, was handed over to paid chaperones who led her around Europe for years on end, during which time her father and stepmother barely communicated with her. Edison had little personal contact with his first three children. Their allowances and letters were managed by his secretary, John Randolph, or by Mina. Edison's three children by Mina, Madeleine, Charles, and Theodore, fared somewhat better. Mina, at least, gave them affection and attention. They too, however, rebelled against their parents in their choice of spouses and careers.

Mina eventually found a measure of fulfillment in the roles of society hostess and family "fixer." She enjoyed mixing with celebrities and hosting lavish parties. She maintained a friendly relationship with the press, helped cultivate Edison's public image as a genius, and, whenever possible, papered-over family scandals. There were plenty of the latter to keep her occupied. Edison's widowed father, Samuel, took up with his housekeeper, 50 years his junior, fathering three daughters out of wedlock. Tom Jr. and William both struggled to hold down jobs and enraged their father by trading on his name. At one point, Tom Jr. marketed an "Edison Junior Improved"

incandescent lamp that was simply one of his father's inventions. Tom Jr.'s marriage to a "casino girl" was the final straw, causing Edison to sever relations.

At times Mina is lost in this biography, as the book traces the stories of the extended Edison and Miller clans. She also remains a bit of a cipher, less colorful or interesting than many of her siblings or the Edison children. The book is scrupulously researched, based on source materials in the extensive Edison archive and voluminous correspondence between Mina and her large family. The book is probably most valuable as a detailed reconstruction of the complicated and often contentious dynamics of two celebrated American families.

Unfortunately, the fascinating story of the Edisons and Millers is continually hampered by an awkward narrative and clumsy prose. The book shows little sign of being proofread or edited. It is full of misspellings, mixed-metaphors, and bad grammar. The author is especially fond of employing pronouns with unclear antecedents so that the reader is frequently left wondering who exactly is the "they" or "she" referred to in a given sentence. The author is also given to hyperbole, as in her assertion that the Mina Miller–Thomas Edison marriage was "one of the most notable weddings in history" (59).

Although Rimer is steeped in the Edison-Miller correspondence, she rarely quotes Mina at any length, preferring to paraphrase her letters. At times Rimer attributes feelings and thoughts to Mina that seem unverifiable. For example, when Mina met her former suitor, George Vincent, shortly after her marriage to Edison, Rimer claims that "this meeting would be a tug at the depths of her heart" (76) but provides no quotation or citation to document this claim.

*Seduced by the Light* remains an important addition to Edison scholarship, but making one's way through its nearly 300 pages is a bit of a challenge.

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