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Let there be light

by Clayton Trutor

The late Edmund Morris's cinderblock-sized biography of Thomas Edison begins with an epigraph from Madeline Edison Sloane, the fourth of the inventor's six children and the only one to grant him any heirs. "I have yet to find a biography of him that satisfies me as a picture of the whole man," she asserts in an undated quotation. "The emphasis is so much on what he did that few people know what he was." *Edison* reads like a response to Sloane's long-ago shot across the bow at her father's biographers, who once wrote *billets-doux* to the "Wizard of Menlo Park" but in recent decades have been more likely to indict him on charges of fraud. Morris takes neither approach in his biography. Instead, he creates a compelling, man-in-full portrait of "Alva," as Edison's relatives often referred to him. The book stacks up with Morris's well-known renderings of Theodore Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and Ludwig van Beethoven. It is as thoroughly researched and gorgeously written as any book that bears Morris's name.

That being said, the portrait of Thomas Edison that emerges in Morris's biography is hardly flattering. Alva turns out to have been the man of accomplishment one expects, and he was not the prude or the thief of revisionist histories. But this made him no less of an unpleasant character. Morris's Edison is impulsive, overbearing, and lacking in empathy. The author makes effective, if often gossipy, use of family correspondence to demonstrate his subject's indifference to his duties as husband and father. In numerous instances, Edison proves to have been far from the pragmatic businessman of his self-appraisals. Instead, the Edison of the corporate world was a didactic micromanager who lacked confidence in anyone to do his or her job correctly, especially if the employee in question was one of his children.

Where the ascetic Edison flourished was in the workshop, the space where this world-changing genius spent almost all of his seven decades of adulthood, either physically or mentally. In his laboratories, whether in Menlo Park or West Orange or downtown Manhattan, the inventor presided over a republic of skill and diligence. The scientists, machinists, and craftsmen who worked alongside Edison enabled him to turn his visions into the trappings of the modern world. He and "his boys" pioneered the research-and-development model as they harnessed electric light, recorded and transmitted sound, and created motion pictures.

One of the book's many strengths is its presentation of Edison's physicality. His face and clothing were forever caked in the grime of the laboratory. Despite his cautiousness in the workshop, Edison, like his compatriots, was the frequent victim of chemical burns, noxious inhalations, and electric shocks. He ate and slept as little as possible. In later life, diabetes sapped him of his energy, taking back the hours of labor he had stolen from the night over a half-century's worth of eighteen-hour shifts. The stress of anticipation, disappointment, and frequent financial strain weighed on Alva throughout his life, which certainly contributed to his permanently sour stomach and bouts of facial tics. More than anything, Edison's hearing problems play a prominent role in the story of the man, serving as the chief antagonist for much of the book. His near-deafness, a condition which emerged for reasons that remain unknown, shaped his social and intellectual development from the age of twelve onward. As a result, the same man who was known to be paralyzed by shyness and an inability to follow conversations was also known to dominate every discussion in which he chose to partake. Though never stating it explicitly, Morris's book makes a compelling case that many of Edison's less admirable personal traits can be attributed at least in part to his hearing loss.

The book's most glaring weakness is its organization. A conscious prose stylist, Morris will rile many readers with his decision to render Edison's life decade by decade but in reverse. This goes a long way towards confusing the details of the subject's life, even to those familiar with its major events. In recounting chronologically Edison's 1870s, for example, which end with the first demonstrations of incandescent light, and then jumping back to Edison's early adolescence in the Port Huron, Michigan, of 1860, the book takes on a dream-like quality. At times, this effect gives the book a sense of cinematic grace, particularly when Morris guides the reader through the labors of Edison and his associates. More often it leaves the reader confused, never sure of the time or the place about which he is reading. Morris's biography-in-reverse of Edison is less frustrating than his notorious decision to include a fictional narrator in *Dutch*, which turned an authorized biography into something of a historical novel. But *Edison*'s irreverent structure reveals the extent to which Morris's aspiration to write aesthetically groundbreaking biographies governed his treatment of his subjects. When compared to his peers among biographers, which would include such giants as Robert Caro, Walter Isaacson, and Ron Chernow, Morris seems to have been more interested in presenting the story of a life in a novel way than in telling that story in a clear way.

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