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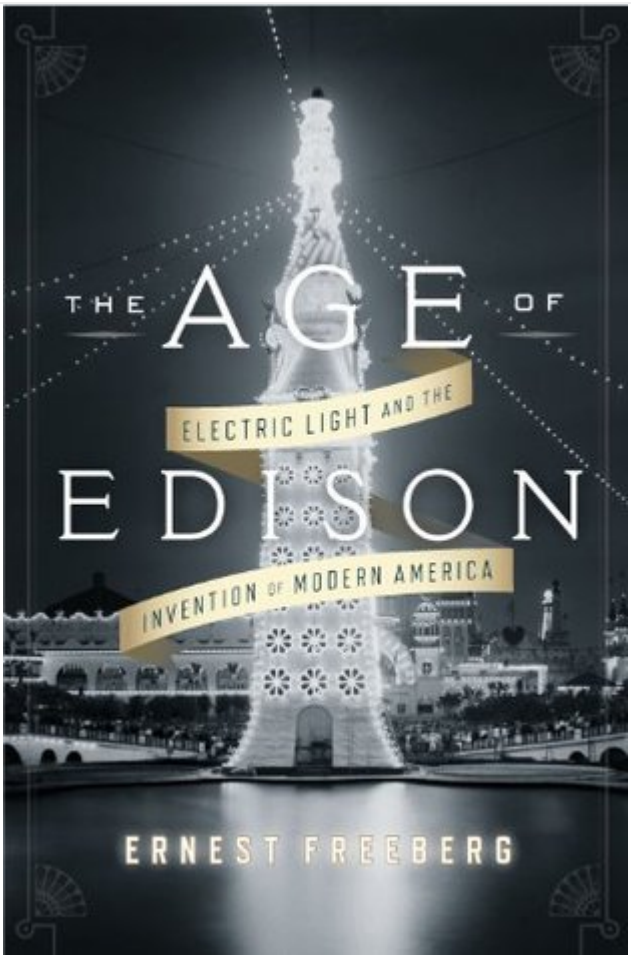
The Age of Edison: Electric Light and the Invention of Modern America



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Reviewed Work(s)

The Age of Edison: Electric Light and the Invention of Modern America. By Ernest Freeberg (New York: New York: The Penguin Press, 2013). Pp. 354. Cloth, $27.95.

According to Ernest Freeberg's *The Age of Edison: Electric Light and the Invention of Modern America*, the light bulb symbolized American progress as the nation entered the twentieth century. Although Freeberg acknowledges the many American and European inventors who contributed to the light bulb's birth—and held the patents to prove it—the "Age of Edison" represented more than just tinkerers fiddling around in make-shift laboratories. Rather, this Age re-affirmed the American self-image of pluck, resourcefulness, and business-savvy in the manner of Horatio Alger. Electric light became a metaphor for a technological manifest destiny, incorporating concepts of eugenics, the arts, class and social dynamics, and nationalism.

Relying on newspapers and press reports, the trade journal *Electrical World*, and secondary sources including biographies, art histories, and historical monographs, Freeberg writes a lively prose for popular audiences and students. An easy free of jargon, and clocking in at a brisk three hundred pages, Freeberg's work presents an interdisciplinary methodology to the Gilded Age. Each chapter focuses on an aspect of the Age of Edison. Although readers can approach each chapter as a standalone piece, the theme of American exceptionalism ties them together. "Democratic" patent laws enticed any would-be inventor to slap together the next get-rich-quick gizmo, electric lights became a battleground between political actors and light and gas companies over public and private illumination, including the level of government regulation over municipal safety codes. Social critics applauded incandescent bulbs for exposing red-light districts while they simultaneously worried over the bulb's impact on factory labor and social mores. Cultural guardians found lit-up nocturnal colors and choreography an artistic achievement even though they resented the crass advertisements illuminated and regretted the ungainly wires crisscrossing the city in daylight.

The shining beacon over the city on a hill also attracted attention from afar. Electric lights contributed to the tensions between urban/rural divides as a symbol of rural backwardness. By the 1930s, the New Deal, especially the TVA, increased the electrification of country areas; electricity served as a sign of national recovery (299). Electricity also became a marker of prestige in the international community. The Japanese also had their own "Eureka!" moment, recognizing electric lights as demonstrations of technological prowess, while Europeans looked on the money-mad, tech-hungry Americans with bemusement and admiration. Electric light's permeability across every facet of American life led to a professionalization of the field, complete with unions and specific nomenclature of amps, ohms, and watts. By 1893, Edison left the electric business, conceding his invention had outgrown its creator (208). The rapid growth of industry giants General Electric and Westinghouse lauded the light bulb as an expression of the United States as a "country of *Doers*" (146). The 1896 $5 silver certificate—part of the so-called "Educational" series to instill civic pride—showcased a heavenly America hoisting a light bulb: America's personal stamp becomes on par with the Almighty over the globe. This work will appeal to historians of science and technology, legal history, diplomatic history, and students of arts and culture

Despite the hoopla surrounding the Age of Edison as a celebration for the nation's democratic values, not every American shared this triumph. Freeberg gives short shrift to cultural critics. By the end of the nineteenth century, "many more Americans were struck less by the electric light's ability to heal than its enormous power to destroy" but the text largely glosses over naysayers (173). He does highlight a few critics: Leo Tolstoy was among the luminaries who bemoaned the commercialization of electric lights as a harbinger of a mass and crass culture, but his contribution to the debate surrounding lights, if any, remains uncertain. On a more popular level, as David J. Skal has shown, for every vision of a brightly-lit utopia, tales of mad scientists warned about tampering with the forces of nature with their Frankenstein-esque, electric-generated monstrosities.[1]Electric power was here to stay, but the dark side of the light bulb, while hinted, remains largely submerged in the text.

The rhetoric of "light" and "dark" also warrants a deeper exploration. Freeberg notes that African Americans contributed to the development of electricity, but he does not name them, nor do racial "Others" have a voice. Rather, the brilliance of white light drowns out all other perspectives. Indeed, the equation of light with progress, especially when employed in civic attempts to combat slums and generate urban renewal, comes at the expense of marginalized communities. The fervor over erecting "great white ways" and the frequent quotes of "pure white light" has a racial implication. Freeberg devotes several pages to missionaries' use of light as a civilizing agent against backward "darkies" but illumination itself seems to support an existing racial hierarchy. Indeed, endnotes list nineteenth-century ethnographic studies, indicating contemporary scholars recognized the white power of incandescent bulbs. Electric lights were more than a status symbol of cities and socialites. Those who lacked pure white light, presumably people of color and the poor, remained in the dark.

Freeberg notes "electric light changed America's relationship with the natural world, changing the rhythms of their days, and transforming their culture" (7). Conversely, the light bulb re-affirmed many assumptions Americans had long held concerning the young nation's remarkable growth. Freeberg's interdisciplinary work helps bridge various fields, highlighting the overlap between methodologies of inquiry through a single object that transformed the world. Modern day readers will surely encounter contemporary themes; in the twenty-first century, the can-do spirit of American knowhow has led the United States into an ever-increasing technologically-dependant way of life as a sign of advancement. The Age of Edison has not ended.

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[1] David J. Skal, *Screams of Reason: Mad Science and Modern Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).

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