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Looking Back

The Last Breath of Thomas Edison

Thomas Edison died seventy-five years ago this fall, with "a rack of eight empty test tubes close to his bedside." For a man whose "real love was chemistry," recounted his son Charles, it was "not strange, but symbolic, that those test tubes were close to him at the end." Just after Edison died, Charles asked the attending physician to seal the glass tubes with paraffin. Charles later gave one of the test tubes to Edison's friend and admirer Henry Ford. For many years, it was on display at the Henry Ford Museum in Michigan under the label "Edison's Last Breath?"

Ford, who had been inspired early on by a meeting with Edison ("No man up to then had given me any encouragement…but here, all at once and out of a clear sky, the greatest inventive genius in the world had given me complete approval"), also paid to have Edison's famous Menlo Park laboratory moved to Michigan. This was a fitting tribute, since Edison's lab was itself among the inventor's greatest innovations: the style of research and development he pioneered there, bringing together the best technical minds, soon became a mainstay of modern industry.

Schoolchildren are still taught of Edison's breathtakingly broad creativity: his thousand patents; his invention of the phonograph and the first practical incandescent light bulb; his improvements to the telephone, telegraph, and typewriter. Lesser innovations that would, on their own, make another man memorable, are drowned in the wide sea of Edison's career—like his pioneering work on motion pictures, or his coining of the word *hello* as the standard telephone greeting.

Perhaps Edison's most important achievement was the one most invisible to us today, the one we most take for granted: electrification. Edison's famous search for the right filament for his light bulb would have been for naught without an electrical industry to power the bulbs. Edison and his team, as Tom McNichol puts it in his new book *AC/DC*, had to "invent a complex system of interlocking technologies to complement the incandescent lamp: switches, meters, sockets, fixtures, regulators, underground conductors, junction boxes, and, most important, a central station" to generate the power and "a distribution network to deliver it." So accustomed have we become to our machines obeying the merest flicks of our fingers that we are apt to forget the genius and the hard work—the inspiration and perspiration, to use Edison's formulation—that made this new world possible.

After Edison breathed his last on October 18, 1931, some of his admirers called for all electrical current in the country to be shut off for two minutes as a tribute on the day of his funeral. "But the proposal drew immediate criticism from businesses and factory owners who argued that cutting the power would cost tens of millions of dollars in lost production," McNichol reports. How few people leave behind a world so thoroughly dependent on their genius, a world of flickering candles and gas lamps remade into one aglow with electricity. Edison, undeniably, was one of the greats.