

Thomas Edison's Forgotten Sci-Fi Novel

Art/Bks/Film

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By feeding his visions for the future to a well-regarded contemporary, the prolific inventor offered a peek into his brilliant mind

By [Greg Daugherty](#) for SMITHSONIAN.COM, Jan 3, 2018 When Thomas Edison died in 1931, he held more than 1,000 patents in the United States alone. He was credited with inventing, or significantly advancing, electric lighting, storage batteries, the motion picture camera, the phonograph and even cement making—among many other things. Edison nearly added another item to his résumé that’s all but forgotten today: *Progress*, a science-fiction novel he began working on around 1890. Although the inventor abandoned the project before it could be finished, he wrote pages and pages of notes that a collaborator, George Parsons Lathrop, would eventually turn into a work of futuristic fiction, [In the Deep of Time](#), published in 1896. A well-regarded author, editor, playwright, and poet of his day, Lathrop (also the son-in-law of Nathaniel Hawthorne) approached Edison in late 1888 with a proposal to collaborate on the inventor’s memoirs according to the 1995 biography *Edison: Inventing the Century*, by Neil Baldwin. Lathrop had already written about him for magazines, including “Talks With Edison,” a widely publicized 1890 *Harper’s* piece that purported to “afford for the first time a vivid perception of how an inventor invents.” By then Edison wasn’t just an inventor to many Americans, but *the* inventor, famous, in particular, for his incandescent light bulb introduced a decade earlier. In his *Harper’s* article, Lathrop observed that, “Mr. Edison resolutely objects to even the appearance of talking about himself in public.” So Lathrop might not have been totally surprised when the great man turned him down. Instead, they came up with another idea: a science fiction novel for which Edison would supply the ideas and Lathrop would do the writing. Edison had little formal education, and while he owned a huge library and was an avid reader, he may not have felt he had either the novelistic talent or the time to write the book himself. When the two men embarked on the project, readers had been snatching up books that speculated about the future while drawing on the latest scientific advances. The French science fiction pioneer Jules Verne, who published *From the Earth to the Moon* in 1865 and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* in 1870, was continuing to crank them out; his 1889 novel, *The Purchase of the North Pole*, involved a scheme to change the tilt of the Earth’s axis with a huge explosion and mine the Arctic for coal. American Edward Bellamy’s bestselling time-travel novel, *Looking Backward*, had appeared in 1888, and a newcomer to the genre, British author [H.G. Wells](#), would publish his breakthrough book, *The Time Machine*, in 1895, followed three years later by *The War of the Worlds*. Edison, probably the most celebrated American scientist of the day, and Lathrop, considered an author of the first rank by contemporary critics, must have seemed like an unbeatable combination; press from around the world published news reports of their project. By late 1892, though, the project seemed to be in trouble. “The electric novel which Mr. Edison was said to be writing is ‘off,’” *The Australian Star*, a Sydney newspaper, announced. “Edison was all enthusiasm at first, and Lathrop had five or six interviews with him, in which Edison poured out suggestions faster than Lathrop could assimilate them,” the account went on to explain. “Then Edison’s enthusiasm

cooled. He tired of the whole thing and would have nothing more to do with it, leaving Lathrop in the lurch with a novel about half done.” [⋯] <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/sci-fi-novel-180967672/>