

Book Reviews

The Diary and Sundry Observations of Thomas Alva Edison, Edited by Dagobert D. Runes

Published (1948) by the Philosophical Library, 15 E. 40 St., New York 16, N. Y. 244 pages + XII pages + 3-page index. 5 illustrations. 6 × 9 inches. Price, \$4.75.

This volume is in all respects the most extraordinary of all the presentations in print pertaining to Mr. Edison. It is quite as remarkable and quite as interesting for what it is not as for what it is. It tells something about him, but with the quality of an image projected through a diffusing screen and picked up by a ground-glass mirror. There is enough of him there for the reader to be conscious of his presence but not convinced of his actuality and substance. To the researcher of tomorrow who would know about Edison, it is a document to be considered and read only after he has seen everything else that has been printed. In that respect, this book would have the same interest which it now has to those intimate with both the real and the traditional Edison and with a measure of his poignant realism and dynamic place in the industrial scene.

From the particularized and technological point of view, of the readers of this journal, the specific attentions attributed to Mr. Edison pertaining to motion pictures are positively somewhat less than negligible. The document contains nothing informative pertaining to Mr. Edison's invention of and contribution to the motion picture which is not either in casual error, in casual misunderstanding, or, at best, susceptible of misinterpretation. For motion picture engineers, this book can be an object lesson in the perils of pseudo-literary adventure in the art of expression for persons who do not carry over into that art the skills and criteria that they bring to bear upon their science. For this peculiar state of affairs, there are two discernible reasons. The first of these pertains to the frequently nonchalant manner in which Mr. Edison discussed his works and his charming willingness to talk about anything which might be a passing topic of interest. Second is the fact that the volume appears to have been assembled and edited by Dr. Dagobert D. Runes, a writer of distinction about philosophical subjects, for his Philosophical Library, Inc. The approach is scholarly-mannered and with a brave effort at categorized analytical presentation of the omniferous miscellany of Mr. Edison's interests, all of them expressed in his declining years.

There is, unhappily because of that play upon the words "the diary," an early disappointment. The "diary" element hazily covers one week in 1885. Very little of the real Edison comes through, anywhere. We get no picture of that salty fellow, dynamic, belligerent, collarless, with tobacco stains on the bosom of his hard-boiled shirt, mildly profane and belligerently positive, talking behind that big roll-top desk at West Orange about what he really thought. We have here an Edison sandpapered, shellacked, and waxed. We do not have, in any part of the book, the "Old Man," ebullient, ironic, and vital.

For purposes of specification to this engineering audience, it is appropriate to cite a single but painfully indicative specimen of error occurring on page 77 of the volume, in which Mr. Edison is caused to say apparently that his Kinetoscope,

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the name of which, incidentally, is misspelled, "attracted quite a lot of attention at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893." The date alleged and the facts pertaining to the Kinetoscope involved are all important to motion picture history. The Kinetoscope, as Mr. Edison had very decided reason to know, was under contract for exhibition at the World's Fair in Chicago in Edisonia Hall, and was in fact not delivered there, being unavailable until after the Fair closed. That was because the mechanic he had assigned to the building of the battery of mechanisms decided to spend most of his time at an adjacent West Orange tavern, playing dominoes or something. Edison cared very little. So, as has been competently recorded and is historically documented, his Kinetoscope made its first appearance to the public on the night of April 14, 1894, at 1155 Broadway.

The great Edison was great enough not to be deceived about himself and he took neither the motion picture nor Edison too seriously. This reviewer once took Mr. Edison to task because of a piece of Sunday-supplement journalism which had gone to extravagant lengths in a sort of interview indicating that the Wizard of West Orange was building a machine with which to communicate with the dead.

The "Old Man" looked puzzled a moment and then flung out with a defense. He said, "Don't be too hard about it. That reporter was a space writer. He came over here without any raincoat and there were holes in his shoes. He needed a story in the worst way and I gave him the best one I could think of."

You need a touch of that to understand this book.

TERRY RAMSAYE
Motion Picture Herald
New York 20, N. Y.

L'Annuaire du Cinema 1948 (Motion Picture Yearbook for 1948)

Published by Editions Bellefaye, 29 Rue Marsoulan, Paris (12^{ème}), France. 1230 pages. 5½ × 8½ inches. Price, \$6.00. United States Representative, André Harley, 15 E. 40 St., New York 16, N. Y.

This French yearbook on the film industry is the first revised and re-edited book of its kind to be published since the Liberation of France.

The book is divided into seventeen sections, subdivided as follows: Paris addresses, out-of-town addresses, general information on French film industry, list of motion picture theaters in Paris and environs with number of seats, manager's name and address, same list for out-of-town theaters, 16-mm section with names of all people interested (laboratories, distributors, synchronizers, and theater owners), films (information on 440 films presented in France between January, 1946, and June, 1947), producers, distributors for Paris, distributors for other regions, export, foreign countries, newspapers and magazines, technicians, artists, suppliers, studios, and laboratories.