



How Invention Begins: Echoes of Old Voices in the Rise of New Machines

John H. Lienhard

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Invention--that single leap of a human mind that gives us all we create. Yet we make a mistake when we call a telephone or a light bulb an invention, says John Lienhard. In truth, light bulbs, airplanes, steam engines--these objects are the end results, the fruits, of vast aggregates of invention. They are not invention itself.

In *How Invention Begins*, Lienhard reconciles the ends of invention with the individual leaps upon which they are built, illuminating the vast web of individual inspirations that lie behind whole technologies. He traces, for instance, the way in which thousands of people applied their combined inventive genius to airplanes, railroad engines, and automobiles. As he does so, it becomes clear that a collective desire, an upwelling of fascination, a spirit of the times--a *Zeitgeist*--laid its hold upon inventors. The thing they all sought to create was speed itself.

Likewise, Lienhard shows that when we trace the astonishingly complex technology of printing books, we come at last to that which we desire from books--the knowledge, the learning, that they provide. Can we speak of speed or education as inventions? To do so, he concludes, is certainly no greater a stretch than it is to call radio or the telephone an "invention."

Throughout this marvelous volume, Lienhard illuminates these processes, these webs of insight or inspiration, by weaving a fabric of anecdote, history, and technical detail--all of which come together to provide a full and satisfying portrait of the true nature of invention.

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