



When I Was a Photographer (MIT Press)

By Félix Nadar

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Celebrated nineteenth-century photographer -- and writer, actor, caricaturist, inventor, and balloonist -- Félix Nadar published this memoir of his photographic life in 1900 at the age of eighty. Composed as a series of vignettes (we might view them as a series of "written photographs"), this intelligent and witty book offers stories of Nadar's experiences in the early years of photography, memorable character sketches, and meditations on history. It is a classic work, cited by writers from Walter Benjamin to Rosalind Krauss. This is its first and only complete English translation.

In *When I Was a Photographer* (*Quand j'étais photographe*), Nadar tells us about his descent into the sewers and catacombs of Paris, where he experimented with the use of artificial lighting, and his ascent into the skies over Paris in a hot air balloon, from which he took the first aerial photographs. He recounts his "postal photography" during the 1870-1871 Siege of Paris -- an amazing scheme involving micrographic images and carrier pigeons. He describes technical innovations and important figures in photography, and offers a thoughtful consideration of society and culture; but he also writes entertainingly about such matters as Balzac's terror of being photographed, the impact of a photograph on a celebrated murder case, and the difference between male and female clients. Nadar's memoir captures, as surely as his photographs, traces of a vanished era.

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Editorial Review

Review

A legendary book, imbued with the rogue personality of its author, finally appears in English, allowing us to wander with him through his memories of a key moment in our modernity. A vital contribution to our understanding of photography both then and now.

(Geoffrey Batchen, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand)

Eloquently nostalgic, discreetly ironic about nostalgia, these pages from another time tell us all kinds of witty, often oblique tales of photography -- from the air, underground, of the dead and the living, in and out of history. Nadar was many other things as well as a photographer but once he had started he never stopped being one, even when he wasn't using a camera. He hasn't stopped now. The deftly translated words of this book offer pictures that prove it.

(Michael Wood, Princeton University)

Nadar's book has finally been translated into English.... [M]any of the vignettes in *When I Was a Photographer* are infused with his rebellious zest.

(*The Wall Street Journal*)

This compact volume gives the sense of being present for the invention of photography.... [Nadar] writes engagingly of photographing a dead man and meeting a bee tamer, and we are charmed.

(*San Francisco Chronicle*)

When I Was a Photographer brims with Nadar's wisdom on a multitude of subjects and subtleties of creative work.

(*Brain Pickings*)

In the age of the selfie, Nadar reminds us of the brave beginnings of a medium that changed the world.

(*The Guardian*)

About the Author

Félix Nadar (1820--1910) is one of the greatest figures in the history of photography. Eduardo Cadava, a writer, translator, and scholar, is the author of *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, coeditor of *The Itinerant Languages of Photography*, and Professor of English at Princeton University. Liana Theodoratou, Clinical Professor of Hellenic Studies and Director of the A. S. Onassis Program in Hellenic Studies at New York University, is a scholar and writer and the translator of several works by Althusser,

Derrida, and Foucault into modern Greek.

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