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Review of 'When I Was a Photographer' by Félix Nadar
Reeve, Charles

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even re-awakening of historical-mindedness in the context of public institutions. If historical consciousness is to play a significant role in productive or meaningful museum practice then any discussion of how it might be possible to change the historical sensibilities of museum goes through exhibition practices, programming initiatives, and other related institutional activities must be premised on a more aggressive and critical assessment of the decline of the importance of history across contemporary society. While there is no question about the validity of this collection of essays considering museums and historical consciousness—whether in Canada or elsewhere—the fact remains that the subject is too complex and too unstable to be potently captured in a volume of this type, no matter how individually thoughtful the contributions or how deftly gathered and thematically organized.

These things said, the volume does invite reconsideration of the institutionally imbedded operations of public culture. Collective memory is vital to national (and arguably post-national) identity, civic mindedness, and the conscientious critically aware functioning of any society. The volume by Gosselin and Livingstone will encourage interested scholars, professionals, and citizen heroes to think about the place of history inside the museum walls and it can be hoped, beyond them.

Michael J. Prokopow is a cultural historian and curator. He teaches at OCAD University.

2. History and Memory, www.indiana.edu/~r-capub/history/memory.html, quoted by the editors in their introduction, p. 5.
3. The volume is the fifth in the distinguished THEN/HIER Historical Consciousness and History Education Series. The History Education Network / Histoire et éducation en réseau is "the first pan-Canadian organization devoted to promoting and improving history teaching by bringing together various constituencies involved in history education." (http://ce.educ.ubc.ca/history-education-network/). Other titles include New Directions in Assessing Historical Thinking, ed. Kadiyie Erickan and Peter Sexas (New York, 2005), Becoming a History Teacher in Canada: Sustaining Practices in Historical Thinking and Knowing, ed. Ruth Sandwell and Amy von Heyking (Toronto, 2014), and New Possibilities for the Past: Shaping History Education in Canada, ed. Penney Clark (Vancouver, 2011).

Félix Nadar

_When I Was a Photographer_


336 pp.
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Charles Reeve

As the nineteenth century ended, the same seemed to happen to Félix Nadar's life in photography. Having sold his Marseilles studio in 1899, he published _Quand j'étais photographe_ ("When I Was a Photographer") in Paris the following year, and an image from 1909 reinforces the sense that he has quit photography. It shows him seated at a large table, pen in hand, examining us deliberately if not unkindly, with no camera in sight. Apparently, his work has shifted from photography to literature. However, since Nadar took the picture himself, it unsettles the pastness of the book's title. As Eduardo Cadava notes in his introduction to this lively rendering—the book's first complete translation into English—Nadar never stopped taking pictures, so the title "figures his death by anticipating it" (xiii). Or, as Rosalind Krauss suggests in "Tracing Nadar," a sensitive account of the awkward amalgam of science and spiritualism that influenced Nadar, maybe this "curious" title signals that photographers, like photography, had morphed from astonishing to unremarkable. Perhaps Nadar wants to recover the "universal stupefation" provoked only fifty years before by what he called that era's "most astonishing and disturbing discovery—photography!" (2–3).

Given the competition—Freud, Darwin, steam, electricity, anaesthesia—privileging photography in this way might seem excessive. But one purpose of _When I Was a Photographer_, which comprises thirteen anecdotes
Félix Nadar, *When I Was a Photographer*

differently by each of this book’s episodes. Though the advances of Joseph Nicéphore Nièpce, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, and William Henry Fox Talbot captivated Nadar, the improvements, phenomena, and effects that encircled photography once it emerged fascinated him more, including aerial and subterranean photography, which he invented, and microfilm, which he helped advance. And the bizarre fantasies that photography prompted also gripped Nadar, such as Honoré de Balzac’s notion that photography diminished one’s physical being.

Many nineteenth-century trends intersected at photography and thus, since he was one of that medium’s most energetic adherents, at Nadar. The self-portrait (c. 1865) on this book’s cover nicely captures this position: Nadar floats in a balloon’s gondola, looking into the distance (or the future), right hand clapping binoculars while his left clutches a rope for balance. Although staged in Nadar’s studio, the picture stresses the value he put on photography’s complicated intersection with flight: as he recounts in “The First Attempt at Aerostatic Photography,” his efforts produced not even “the suspicion of an image” until he realized that balloon gas was spewing onto the photographic plate, interfering with the chemistry, and developed a work-around (64–67). So too in Paris’s sewers and catacombs, or during the Franco-Prussian War, each new context requiring more ingenuity from Nadar, and each instance of ingeniousness getting its own delightful (there is no other word) treatment here.

Nor did Nadar limit his intercessions to science and engineering. He knew the landscape painter Charles-François Daubigny, buying two pictures from him in 1859. More famously, in April 1874, he hosted the first Impressionist exhibition in his rooms on the Boulevard des Capucines. Moreover, Nadar illustrated, published caricatures, and wrote prolifically. By the time of *Quand j’étais photographe*, he had authored numerous books including, forty-five years earlier, another compendium of episodes, *Quand j’étais étudiant*. Thoroughly familiar with his epoch’s literary world, he referenced Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat” in his account of photography as homicide (the perpetrators and accusers, Nadar says, need “to strike at the wall of Poe’s cellar from where the denouncing meowing will come out” [50]) and channelled Poe in his use of overly formal prose to, paradoxically, enliven his narrative. He knew Honoré Daumier and Charles Baudelaire, affectionately skewering the latter in an early caricature.

Yet Nadar was not alone as a nineteenth-century artist-cum-literatus. In fact, life writing by visual artists specifically had a “moment” in the years just prior to *Quand j’étais photographe*, the diaries and autobiographies of Maria Bashkirtseff, Adrian Ludwig Richter, and William Powell Frith attracting considerable interest, and excerpts from what became Paul Gauguin’s *Noa Noa* appearing in *La Revue blanche* in 1896. While Nadar does not mention any of this literature, it is hard to imagine that he did not know of Bashkirtseff’s book, and perhaps the others as well. He certainly knew of the interest in artists’ life writing since he twice mentions (favourably) his association with Léopolde Leclanché, both times identifying Leclanché as the translator of Benvenuto Cellini’s *Vita* (13, 143). Given this pre-existing interest in artists’ life writing, and Nadar’s fame and story-telling verve, I am mystified that *Quand j’étais photographe*, as Krauss says, sank without a trace in 1900. Perhaps this edition will garner the attention Nadar’s memoir deserves.

Not that others have not tried. Krauss’s article was an afterword of sorts for Thomas Repensek’s translation of the book’s first three chapters in October (which raises another mystery: why stop there?), More recently, Stephen Bann’s “‘When I Was a Photographer’: Nadar and History” nicely frames the way Nadar’s writing positions photography within an awareness of the impact this invention would have—Bann’s point being that one only can take account of Nadar’s photography by considering how Nadar himself took account of photography. But for the most part, discussions of Nadar’s work at best mention his writing only in passing, thus distorting our picture of his cultural contribution. This book’s corrective fits into broader patterns of recovering not only the active literary lives of nineteenth-century artists but also photography’s trajectory during that time from miraculous to commonplace. It fleshes out our understanding of Nadar, of the astonishment that greeted photography’s birth, and of the vigour with which visual artists participated in the late nineteenth-century literary culture.

In general, this book performs these functions well, which is not surprising given that Eduardo Cadava, a Professor of English at Princeton, has written two books on photography, and New York University’s Liana Theodoratou has extensive experience rendering complex French texts into other languages. However, a few disconcerting slips do appear. One concerns Nadar’s description of the academic system as “this St. Helena,” which a footnote oddly claims alludes to the site of Napoleon’s exile (yes) and to his “role in creating a Salon des Refusés...in 1863” (uh, no) (256). And a later footnote again elides uncle and nephew, stating that “Napoleon” granted composer Jacques Offenbach French citizenship (258). These slip-ups make me wonder if further problems mar this generally engaging, useful project. Still, the overall level of care that Theodoratou and Cadava accord Nadar’s exploits and writerly verve makes *When I Was a Photographer* valuable for anyone interested in photography or nineteenth-century French culture—or, in fact, just a great read. ♦

Anne-Élisabeth Vallée


Jacques Des Rochers et Brian Foss
(sous la dir. de)

Une modernité des années 1920 à Montréal: le groupe de Beaver Hall
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