

EDWARD WATSON (1840–1901)
AN AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHER IN ROME, 1866–71

John F. McGuigan Jr.

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Author of “‘The Effulgent Light of a Southern Sky’:

Early Photography in Rome, 1839–1871”

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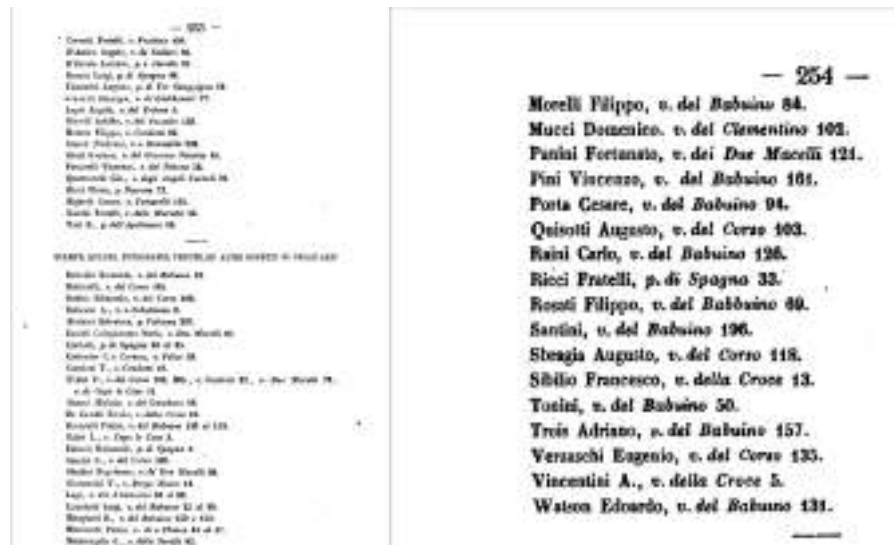
Early Photography in the Capital of the Art World, 1842–1871

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“E. Watson,” a landscape photographer who worked in Rome during the waning years of the Papal States, briefly emerged from obscurity to re-enter the photographic canon in 1979 when a group of twelve mounted albumen prints from wet collodion glass negatives appeared at auction in London.¹ The names of the subjects were given but none were illustrated in the sale catalogue, and it was noted that one of them bore the blindstamp: “E. WATSON / 31 / VIA BABUINO / ROME / ITALY / PHOTOGRAPHS.” Four years later, Piero Becchetti—the only historian until now to have recognized “Eduard Watson” (as he called him)—featured this discovery in his groundbreaking catalogue *La fotografia a Roma dalle origini al 1915* and wrote that Watson was a “Landscape photographer, almost certainly of English nationality, working in Rome in via del Babuino 31 in the years that mark the end of temporal power and the beginning of Rome as the capital. He was mentioned in the *Guida Monaci* of 1871 as a photography dealer and in that of 1872 as a photographer.”²

As a matter of fact, the 1871 *Guida Monaci* identified him as Edoardo Watson and listed him under the broader category of “Prints, Paintings, Photographs, Views, and Other Fine Art Objects,” which does not preclude the possibility that he only dealt in his own work, just as others in that category did, such as Edmond Behles, Tommaso Cuccioni, Michele Danesi, Pietro Dovizielli, and Enrico Verzaschi.³



¹ Sotheby's Belgravia, *Photographic Images and Related Material*, 14 March 1979, lot 159. "159. ROME. TWELVE PHOTOGRAPHS, studies of the monuments of ancient Rome, Albumen Prints, each approximately 200 by 265mm, one with blind stamped credit 'E. Watson 31 Via Babuino Rome Italy Photographs', 1870s." [Sold for £20.]

² Piero Becchetti, *La fotografia a Roma dalle origini al 1915* (Rome: Editore Colombo, 1983), 357–58: "WATSON, Eduard. Fotografo vedutista, quasi certamente di nazionalità inglese, operante a Roma in via del Babuino 31 negli anni che segnano la fine del potere temporale e l'inizio di Roma capitale. È segnalato nella *Guida Monaci* del 1871 come commerciante di fotografie e in quella del 1872 come fotografo. Dodici vedute di Roma recanti il timbro a secco. « E. Watson 31 — via Babuino — Rome — Italy » figurano nel catalogo *Photographs — Sotheby* del marzo 1979." *Sotheby, catalogo n. 159*, vendita del 14 marzo 1979, pag. 28.

³ "Stampe, Quadri, Fotografie, Vedute, ed Altri Oggetti di Belle Arti," in Tito Monaci, *Guida Monaci* (Rome: Sinimberghi, 1871), 254.

Until recently, I could only add to this brief biography that Watson was included from 1872 to 1877 in Augustus Hare's vade mecum *Walks in Rome* under "Photographers.—For views of Rome.—Watson, Via Babuino," alongside Robert Macpherson, Michele Mang, James Anderson, Francesco Adriano de Bonis, and Fratelli d'Alessandri.⁴

Photographers.—For views of Rome.—Watson, Via Babuino; Macpherson, 12 Vicolo Aliberti; Mang, 104 Via Felice; Anderson (his photographs sold at Spithover's). *For Artistic Bits*, very much to be recommended, De Bonis, 28 Via S. Isidoro. *For Portraits*.—Suscipi, 48 Via Condotti (the best for medallions); Alessandri, 12 Corso (excellent for Cartes de Visite); Luis, 57 Via del Campo-Marzo; Ferretti, 50 Via Sta. Maria in Via.

He likewise appeared in Charles Fabre's annual *Aide-Mémoire de Photographie* as "Watson" between 1876 and 1896 in the section: "General List of the Principal Photographers . . . Rome (Italy). Anderson – d'Alessandri frères. – Behles. – Belli. – Borelli. – Caccionia. – Danesi. – Falcetti. – Le Lieure. – Mang. – Ninci. – Ravenna. – Sbrascia. – Spina frères. – Suscipi. – Watson."⁵ These two popular handbooks often reprinted names and addresses long after people had moved or died, and so we cannot assume that this twenty-year time span accurately records his period of residence in Rome. It may be that his stock of photographs continued to be sold through other photographers and establishments under his name.

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RENNES (Ille-et-Vilaine).	Berthon. — Faure. — Per-
Chala. — Gerard. — Mé-	— Fortunier. — Gailhard
vius. — Simon Guyard.	— Konrad. — Chéri Rou-
ROANNE (Loire).	seau. — Vachon. — <i>Artis-</i>
M ^{re} Chambefort. —	<i>cules photographiques</i> : Ar-
Chaumont. — Fargier.	naud.
ROCHEFORT (Char.-Inf.).	S.-GERM.-EX-L. (S.-et-O.)
L. Morel.	Lemaire. — Talaffin —
LA ROCHELLE (Ch.-Inf.).	Veber. — Zaal.
Chateau. — Cognacq.	SAINT-LO (Manche).
— Tallon-Larente.	Perrin.
ROMANS (Drôme).	SAINTE-MENESBOULD (M.)
Augagneur et Grenier.	Pattey. — Patte.
— Guillermin.	SAINTES (Charente-Inf.).
ROME (Italie).	Alcide.
Anderson d'Alessandri	SARRELBURG (Lorraine).
frères. — Behles. — Belli.	Furté.
— Borelli. — Caccionia. —	SARREBOURG (Lorraine)
Danesi. — Falcetti. — Le	Lantz.
Lieure. — Mang. — Ninci.	SAUMUR (Maine-et-Loir.)
— Ravenna. — Sbrascia. —	Crauk. — Niepce. — Del-
Spina frères. — Suscipi.	phin.
— Watson.	

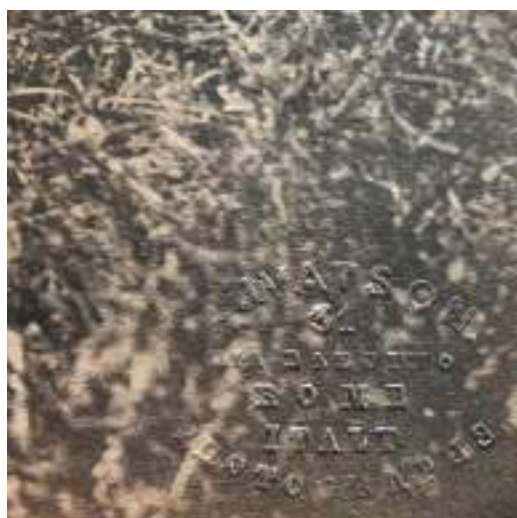
In 2022 I acquired a loose album of photographs from a French dealer, all clearly by the same hand and of the same size (approximately 20.5 x 28 cm), one of which

⁴ Augustus J. C. Hare, *Walks in Rome*, 3rd edition, 2 vols. (London: Strahan & Co, 1872), I:29; Augustus J. C. Hare, *Walks in Rome*, 6th American edition (New York: George Routledge & Sons, 1877), 2.

⁵ "Liste Générale des Principaux Photographes . . . Rome (Italie)," in Charles Fabre, *Aide-Mémoire de Photographie* (Toulouse: Edouard Privat, 1876), 109; and every issue in between until Charles Fabre, *Aide-Mémoire de Photographie* (Paris: Gauthier-Villars et Fils, 1896), 209.

fantastically had Watson's blindstamp. Newly armed with this keystone and large body of images, I was finally able to identify Watson as the photographer of an oeuvre of over fifty prints that have been in my personal collection since 2014, that I, with the collaboration of Maria Francesca Bonetti, had previously classified as by an "English Amateur" for the simple reason that all the mounts were inscribed in English. Furthermore, after searching the internet, I found that in 2020 another large collection of Watson's Roman photographs had come up at an obscure auction, one with his blindstamp, consisting of many of the same subjects as in my collection and corresponding to the titles of those that had surfaced back in 1979. Despite this marvelous discovery, no matter how much research I conducted, I could advance the narrative no further than Becchetti had forty years earlier.





Feeling frustrated with how little I knew about Watson at this point, I laid the topic aside and turned to other projects for several months until one day when my wife and fellow art historian Mary K. McGuigan walked into my office and casually asked, “You’re working on a photographer named Watson, aren’t you? I think I may have found something

for you.” As part of her ongoing research on Elihu Vedder (1836–1923), an American expatriate painter in Rome, she had, in fact, serendipitously found a clue in his papers that proved to be the key for me to unlock this mystery. In a letter written to Vedder on 15 June 1871 by his countryman, the painter George Henry Yewell (1830–1923), on board the steamship *Trojan* from Palermo to New York, the author casually remarked: “Watson the photographer is a passenger over with us, the only one besides ourselves.”⁶ From this rather offhanded comment I searched the internet for the ship’s passenger manifest, which identified: “Edward Watson, artist, 30 years of age, from the United States of America.”⁷

Name	Age	Sex	Birthplace	Remarks	Signature
George Yewell	41	Male	United States	United States	J. H. Yewell
Charles Yewell	32	Male	United States	United States	J. H. Yewell
John Yewell	28	Male	United States	United States	J. H. Yewell
Edward Watson	30	Male	United States	United States	J. H. Yewell
Charles Yewell	26	Male	United States	United States	J. H. Yewell
Antonia	24	Female	Germany	Germany	J. H. Yewell
Robert Yewell	22	Male	United States	United States	J. H. Yewell
Thomas Yewell	19	Male	United States	United States	J. H. Yewell

Edward Watson was, in fact, born in Fingal, Southwold Township, Elgin, Ontario, Canada, on 27 December 1840. The first nine years of his life were spent upon the family farm until his parents, practically destitute, made the momentous decision in 1849 to abandon their ancestral home and move their three sons and daughter to the United States. They settled 150 miles due west in the town of Ann Arbor, Michigan, purportedly because Edward’s mother wanted to give her children the opportunity to attend the University of Michigan (established there in 1837). Older brother James Craig Watson was the first to enroll at the age of fifteen in 1853 and went on to become a professor there and a renowned astronomer.⁸ Edward followed in the autumn of 1860, but, after only one year in the Literature Department, he answered President Abraham Lincoln’s call for volunteers at the outbreak of the American Civil War and enlisted as a private on 16 September 1861 in the

⁶ George H. Yewell, at sea, 15 June 1871, to Elihu Vedder, Perugia. Vedder papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 516, frames 614–16. Courtesy of Mark K. McGuigan.

⁷ *New York, U. S. Arriving Passenger Lists, 14 July 1871, “The Trojan.”* National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

⁸ George C. Comstock, “Biographical Memoir of James Craig Watson,” *The Sidereal Messenger* 7, no. 7 (August 1888): 274–86.

Battle Creek Engineer Corps under E. P. Howland.⁹ However, when this small but enthusiastic unit of fifty-three men reported for duty in St. Louis, Missouri five weeks later, they were deemed unfit for service due to inadequate training and improper equipment and mustered out (honorably discharged from service).¹⁰ Edward returned to Ann Arbor, never to see action during the war, although his name remained on the draft rolls where his occupation was listed on 17 June 1863 as “Daguerreian.”¹¹

[illegible]

Around 1865, Watson moved to Brooklyn, New York with his parents and siblings and opened a professional photographic studio at 55 Henry Street, though little else is known about his time there.¹²

⁹ U.S., Civil War Soldier Records and Profiles, 1861–1865, Record of Service of Michigan Volunteers, 1861–65, Ancestry.com, accessed 30 October 2022.

¹⁰ U.S. Civil War Soldier Records and Profiles, 1861–1865, Record of Service of Michigan Volunteers, 1861–65, Ancestry.com, accessed 30 October 2022.

¹¹ Consolidated list of all persons of Class I, subject to do military duty in the third congressional district, consisting of the counties of Eaton, Ingham, Calhoun, Jackson, and Washtenaw, State of Michigan, enumerated during the month of June, 1863, U.S. Civil War Draft Registrations Records, 1863–1865, National Archives and Records Administration.

¹² 1865 New York State Census, Ancestry.com; J. Lain, comp., *The Brooklyn City Directory for the Year Ending May 1st, 1867* (Brooklyn: J. Lain and Company, 1867), 590–91.

Watson Albert, auctioneer, 99 Liberty, N. Y.
 h 139 Butler
 Watson Andrew, rigger, h 70 9th
 Watson C. seaman, h Bergen n. Ralph av
 Watson Christopher C. h Portland av. n. At-
 lantic av
 Watson David, machinist, h Conover n. Wolcott
 Watson Edward, boarding, h 24 Bergen
 Watson Edward, clerk, h 106 Hamilton
 Watson Edward, photographer, 55 Henry, h 35
 Henry
 Watson E. physician, h 25 Henry
 Watson E. R. wid. h 51 St. Felix
 Watson Gaylord, map publisher, 16 Beekman,
 N. Y. h h 210 Fort Green pl
 Watson George, h Bowne n. Richard
 Watson George, h Franklin n. Java
 Watson George, pilot, h 342 State
 Watson George, seaman, h 15th n. 5th av
 Watson G. shoemkr. h Grand av. n. Myrtle av

The following year, Watson embarked upon a European grand tour before eventually settling in Rome in 1866.¹³ We can date his efforts with wet collodion in Rome to as early as 1867–1870 with a degree of certainty thanks to the keen eye and knowledge of the Roman architect and photography historian Andrea Sciolari, who, with the aid of a friend, identified that the pontifical sentinel standing on the left of Watson's *Arch of Drusus* (which also includes a self-portrait standing at the far right, identifiable from other portraits) cradles a Remington Rolling Block Rifle. These advanced weapons only had been purchased by the Papal States in 1867–1868 and were in use until 20 September 1870, when royal Italian troops seized them for their Bersaglieri, as they were far superior to anything the Piedmontese army possessed.¹⁴



¹³ Dwight Goss, *History of Grand Rapids and Its Industries*, vol. 1 (Chicago: C. F. Cooper & Co., Publishers, 1906), 209.

¹⁴ Andrea Sciolari, email to the author dated 25 March 2022.

Frustratingly, no other clues have surfaced to further elucidate Watson's residence in Rome. We can, however, infer from the familiar tone of Yewell's reference that he had integrated into the American expatriate community of artists, and his impressive oeuvre indicates a thorough assimilation of contemporary standards and practices, with a masterful technique and a diverse corpus of artistically composed views of the city and Campagna. Despite his obvious talent and professional aspirations, I believe the main reason for his 150 years of obscurity is that he rarely used his blindstamp (I personally know only of the three examples already cited), and without this telltale mark of authorship his name was lost to posterity, like so many other anonymous photographers of the era.

Watson apparently sold his photographic stock when he returned to America in 1871, as images from his negatives continued to be printed in Rome and were compiled in tourist albums that I can date from the 1870s and 1880s. He arrived back in New York with Yewell on 14 July 1871, seemingly never again to practice photography, at least professionally, and immediately reenrolled at the University of Michigan where he earned a medical degree two years later and opened a practice in Grand Rapids, Michigan.¹⁵ In 1876 he married Alice J. Fralick and two years later they relocated to Sioux Falls, South Dakota,¹⁶ a frontier town with a population of 600, incorporated in 1876—a far cry from Italy. For the next twenty-three years, Watson distinguished himself in the medical profession, eventually returning to Grand Rapids but, as he and his wife had no children, nor did any of his siblings, after his death in 1901, his legacy as a gifted photographer working in Michigan, New York, and Rome for fifteen years seemed to have been buried with him in 1901, that is, until now.



¹⁵ *University of Michigan. General Catalogue of Officers and Students 1837–1890* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1891), 371.

¹⁶ *History of Southeaster Dakota* (Sioux City, Iowa: Western Publishing Company, 1881), 317–18.









