



The Last Alchemist

By Iain McCalman
ISBN: 9780060006914

Introduction

Was Count Cagliostro a sinner or a saint == the worst scoundrel of his age or a great occult healer?

Freemason, necromancer, shaman, copt, prophet, rejuvenator, heretic, and, ultimately, immortal == Count Cagliostro was known by all these names and yet, perhaps, least known by his real name, Giuseppe Balsamo. In this "rollicking narrative [about] a fantastic rogue" (*Boston Globe*), historian Iain McCalman opens the door into the life of the greatest enchanter of the 18th century.

Born in Palermo, Sicily, in 1743, Giuseppe Balsamo grew up a poor street thug. But put to work as a chemical apprentice at a monastery, Balsamo soon earned local fame as an alchemist until he was forced to flee after conning a merchant out of a fortune. From that moment, Balsamo embarked on an

adventure that would allow him to enter the worlds of artists, royalty, and religious figures ... if only for a little while.

Because "a good adventurer also needed an attractive professional repertoire and remarkable versatility," he crafted reputations that were as sensational as they were suspicious. He could turn mercury into gold, converse with the ghosts of the dead, predict future events, cure illness and disease, and knew the great secret of eternal youth.

Charismatic and cunning, he changed his name to Colonel Pellegrini, and then, later, to Count Alessandro di Cagliostro. Early on in his travels, he discovered both his true love == his wife, Seraphina == and his true passion == Freemasonry. He would use both to charm the nobility all over Europe while constructing a curious social pattern == at first excited acceptance upon his arrival, followed by scandal, then public outrage and exile == in every country he visited. But ironically, it would be his loyalty to Seraphina and Freemasonry that would lead Cagliostro to his final undoing.

Crossing paths with such historical figures as Casanova, Catherine the Great, Marie Antoinette, and Pope Pius VI, Cagliostro remains, even today, a controversial character who was involved in scandals like "the affair of the necklace," as well as humanitarian acts like opening healing clinics for the poor. A restless wanderer and a robin hood of sorts, he acquired as many followers as he did critics. By analyzing the Cagliostro phenomenon, author McCalman has written a biography that is "perceptive, intelligent, and == by no means least == immensely entertaining" (*Washington Post*).

Questions for Discussion

1. What do Sicilians believe to be Cagliostro's first elixir?
2. What three elements of the Templar myth attracted Cagliostro?
3. How were Casanova and Cagliostro similar? Where did they differ?
4. What was "the transformative moment of [Cagliostro's] life?"
5. Cagliostro had many enemies, but whom do you consider to be his true nemesis == Casanova, Elisa von der Recke, Catherine the Great, Marie Antoinette, Countess Jeanne de Valois de La Motte, Théveneau de Morande, the de Loutherbours, Cardinal Doria, Pope Pius VI, or his wife Seraphina?
6. How did Cagliostro prove his credentials to the Masons of Mitau?
7. What miscalculation did the Count make in Saint Petersburg?
8. Cagliostro diagnosed a patient in Saint Petersburg: "Thou art possessed by the demon of pride, and that drives thee out of thy mind" (page 88). Discuss the irony of this statement.
9. Which one of Cagliostro's "professions" combined his three great skills == magic, religion, and medicine?
10. In the "the affair of the necklace," what act eventually led to the plan's downfall? Which participant paid the highest price?
11. Who were the Count's greatest champions throughout his life?
12. What fateful moment "threw Cagliostro into the maelstrom of subversive politics" and why?
13. When the Count died in jail, what did Governor Semproni do to make sure he was dead?
14. There are those that believe Cagliostro influenced some monumental events in history. Discuss these theories as well as some of the popular myths that emerged after his death. In your opinion, what does Cagliostro's life and death represent in historical terms?

About the Author

Dr. Iain McCalman is the Director of the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University. He is also an internationally renowned cultural historian and author/editor of seven scholarly works, including the widely acclaimed *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* and, most recently, *The Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*.