

Book Review

by **Bob Nairn**



The seven ordeals of Count Cagliostro

Iain McCalman

Century Hutchinson (2003)

hc, 288 pp, 9.2 x 6.3 x 1.3 inches

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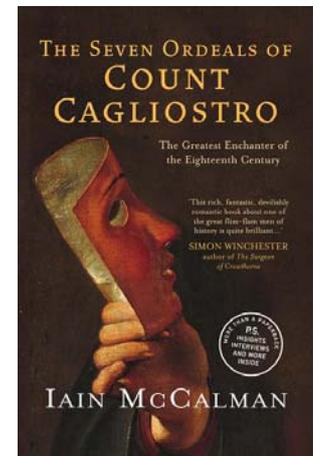
HarperCollins Australia (2004)

pb, 384 pp, 107 x 197 x 25 mm

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Born Giuseppe Balsamo, in Palermo, Sicily, in 1743, he was forced to flee Palermo and adopted his uncle Joseph's name, Cagliostro, and a fictitious title to become Count Alessandro Cagliostro, to begin a life as an adventurer, working on the credibility of the gullible. He joined the Knights of Malta and learned healing and alchemy but returned to Rome to become a secretary to Cardinal Orsini; he spent his spare time learning forgery. Married, and fleeing forgery charges, he travelled through Spain and France to London. He appears to have become a Freemason in London, in Esperance Lodge No 369,¹ and to have been a Rosicrucian. He invented what he called the Egyptian Rite of Freemasonry, which is said to have included healing, séances, alchemical experiments, magic displays, and also included women as members.² This rite has been modified into the Rite of Memphis-Misraim, which currently operates in Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, France, Martinique, Mauritius, New Caledonia, Portugal, Russia, Scandinavia, Spain, Switzerland, Uruguay, USA, and Venezuela.³

Cagliostro was chased out of Prussia by Frederick the Great, from Russia by Catherine the Great, from France by Louis XVI (after the 'Diamond Necklace Trail'), and out of Britain, finally being condemned to death by the Inquisition in his native Italy. McCallum might have spent a little more time on Cagliostro's visit to Russia,⁴ which was significant in turning Catherine the Great against Freemasonry; certainly the plays she wrote ridiculing Freemasonry were satirical of Cagliostro's brand.

The biography is significant because of the incredible adventures Cagliostro and his wife undertook, and the influence he had over many significant people. He undoubtedly had some healing ability and should be remembered for his efforts in spreading Freemasonry (albeit of a dubious kind) throughout Europe. However the contrast between his schemes for enriching himself through trickery and the growing success of the age of reason in overcoming superstition is the dominant theme in the book.

This book also has some importance because elsewhere the identity of Cagliostro is usually treated as unknown or unproven but McCallum is quite definite and gives several sources.

McCalman's book does not discuss Cagliostro's Freemasonry as such but has many references to his séances, alchemical experiments and his wide reputation in Europe as a healer. It is a scholarly work, not judgmental, but reporting all aspects of Cagliostro's character, good and bad.

Bob Nairn

Notes

1 See "*Cagliostro and his Egyptian Rite of Freremasonry*" by Henry R Evans, Cornerstone, ISBN 1 887560 18 1.

2 See www.djmcadam/cagliostro or wikipedia.org/wiki/Cagliostro.

3 Wikipedia.

4 *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*, Isabel de Madariaga, 1919, particularly Chapter 33, 'The Role of Freemasonry', Yale University Press, ISBN 0-300-02515-7.