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Upstate Cauldron: Eccentric Spiritual Movements in Early New York State (Excelsior Editions)

Joscelyn Godwin

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A guide to the phenomenal crop of prophets, cults, and utopian communities that arose in Upstate New York from 1776 to 1914.

From 1776 to 1914, an amazing collection of prophets, mediums, sects, cults, utopian communities, and spiritual leaders arose in Upstate New York. Along with the best known of these, such as the Shakers, Mormons, and Spiritualists, this book explores more than forty other spiritual leaders or groups, some of them virtually unknown, but all of them fascinating. The author uncovers common threads that characterize these homegrown spiritualities, including roots in Western esoteric traditions, liberation from the psychological pressures of dogmatic Christianity, a preoccupation with sex, and involvement in the radical reform movements of the day. In addition to maps and photographs of surviving buildings and monuments, the book also features a gazetteer of sites listing 150 locations connected to these groups, which may be used as a helpful travel guide to the region.

“The dean of alternative spiritual history produces one of his central and most thoughtful works in *Upstate Cauldron*. This book is more than a cauldron: It is a melting pot into which Joscelyn Godwin blends the diffuse and complex religious movements that once converged in Upstate New York to show how we became a modern civilization indelibly stamped by the experience of spiritual outsiders. This is both splendid history and a book of wonders in uncovering lost fragments of our world. Throw away your highlighter—because you won’t know where to stop.” — Mitch Horowitz, author of *Occult America: White House Séances, Ouija Circles, Masons, and the Secret Mystic History of Our Nation*

“What a fascinating book! *Upstate Cauldron* takes a refreshing and new look at the period of time when Upstate New York was the center of the Spiritualist movement in America. Joscelyn Godwin has written a book that is very difficult to put down, introducing us to the most wonderful and exotic individuals. People like Timothy Brown, who built one of the most intricate (and most photographed) homes in Central New York with his own hands and out of his own head. Can you say ‘spiritual guidance’? And we meet Kate and Maggie Fox, who may have been America’s earliest rap stars. The fabulous Fox sisters used secret rapping sounds to convince converts that they were communicating with the ‘other world.’ Anthony Damiani was a spiritual godfather to many young people in the university city of Ithaca. He doled out his visions of wisdom on Ithaca’s main street, and when done, raced fifty miles to his job as a New York State Thruway toll taker. These are just some of the sometimes incredible, sometimes bizarre, but always interesting people at the core of Upstate’s Spiritualism history. Godwin tells the story of a little-known historical chapter of the area with insight and great liveliness. As the author myself of a half dozen books about Upstate New York, I found this book irresistible and absorbing.” — Chuck D’Imperio, author of *Unknown Museums of Upstate New York: A Guide to 50 Treasures*

“Destined to become the definitive book on eccentric religion in this geographical area, this is a fascinating account of unusual and inventive religious figures and movements. Sure-handed, even-tempered, and wry, Joscelyn Godwin is the ideal guide, and his book is one that all readers will want to have in hand as they explore this historically rich and important region. What’s more, it is an important book for understanding a

vital part of American religious history.” — Arthur Versluis, author of *American Gurus: From Transcendentalism to New Age Religion*

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