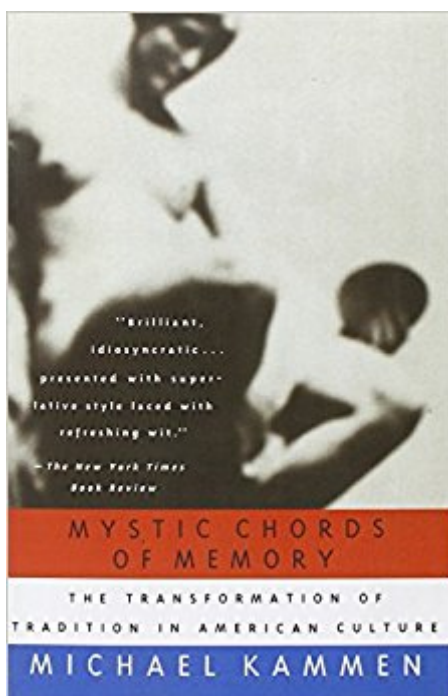


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Mystic Chords Of Memory: The Transformation Of Tradition In American Culture



Synopsis

Mystic Chords of Memory" Illustrated with hundreds of well-chosen anecdotes and minute observations . . . Kammen is a demon researcher who seems to have mined his nuggets from the entire corpus of American cultural history. . . . Insightful and sardonic." *Washington Post Book World* In this groundbreaking, panoramic work of American cultural history, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *A Machine That Would Go of Itself* examines a central paradox of our national identity. How did "the land of the future" acquire a past? And to what extent has our collective memory of that past—as embodied in our traditions—been distorted, or even manufactured? Ranging from John Adams to Ronald Reagan, from the origins of Independence Day celebrations to the controversies surrounding the Vietnam War Memorial, from the Daughters of the American Revolution to immigrant associations, and filled with incisive analyses of such phenomena as Americana and its collectors, "historic" villages and Disneyland, *Mystic Chords of Memory* is a brilliant, immensely readable, and enormously important book. "Fascinating . . . a subtle and teeming narrative . . . masterly." *Time* "This is a big, ambitious book, and Kammen pulls it off admirably. . . . [He] brings a prodigious mind and much scholarly rigor to his task. . . . An important book—and a revealing look at how Americans look at themselves." *Milwaukee Journal*

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Kammen's massive study makes an important contribution to our understanding of how Americans define themselves and the parameters of freedom. Illustrations. Copyright 1993 Reed Business

Within the last ten years, many American historians have discovered the importance of collective "memory" in shaping their nation. In some respects following the lead of influential historians from other nations, they now try to understand the forces that shaped the ways in which Americans remember and use their past and what significant events altered their consciousness of history. Long before recent scholars began decrying the dominance of obscure monographs and calling for greater convergence of ideas in historical studies, Kammen had demonstrated that synthesis could be accomplished without sacrificing richness of detail and divergent interpretations. Moreover, he showed that historians could communicate with one another and a wider audience at the same time. This book, part of Kammen's multivolume rethinking of American history, presents his view of the growing dependence on and debate over collective memory as a historical force during four periods since 1870. With great skill he distinguishes the ways Americans adapted their views of the past to fit the needs of their present circumstances. He weaves a command of formal cultural history with a thorough understanding of popular culture into an astonishingly wonderful book that enlightens not only the history of the past century and a quarter but also the present.- Charles K. Piehl, Mankato State Univ., Minn. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Michael Kammen questions this possibility and suggests that all meaning about the past is suffused with concerns for the present and shaped by the memory of significance. No area of historical study in the last twenty years has been more important than the nature of memory. The analysis of how stories about the past become a master narrative, and what lessons those teach to those interested in the subject has been a growing area of concern in American history. This book helps to pull those ideas together into a coherent discussion. At a fundamental level Kammen's subject is the memory of memory, and his entrance point is the cultural institutions that commemorate the past. He asserts that his goal is to discover how "the United States became a land of the past, a culture with a discernable memory (or with a configuration of recognized pasts)" (p. 7). Kammen ranges broadly across the American landscape in time and space, focusing attention on museums, historic sites, patriotic groups, antiquarian groups, and other self-styled keepers of the nation's identity. His discussion of Colonial Williamsburg, as well as other depictions of the past, is an especially interesting aspect of the "Mystic Chords of Memory." Divided chronologically into four main parts; throughout he offers a level of detail that sometimes strangles his central thesis. That thesis might

best be characterized by a concern for "the public's willingness to accept mythical history that is patently unreal." He seeks "genuine remembrance" and laments that "not enough people pay attention to scholarly history" (respectively pp. 129, 137, and 38). Perhaps it is just as well that his thesis is submerged since it has the ring of academic whining. Far too much scholarly work is inaccessible to the interested adult non-historian. At the same time, historical works routinely reach large audiences but almost all are written in an engaging manner and the authors may not necessarily be academically trained historians. Clearly Michael Kammen makes many important observations in this massive work. It is an important benchmark in American historiography and a worthy reading experience for anyone seeking to understand how its inhabitants remember and interpret the nation's past. At more than 700 pages of text, and another 100 or so of references, it is a substantial tome whose size will dissuade many from fully exploring on its ideas. Too bad, for it is well worth the time.

Ranges from John Adams to Ronald Reagan, from the origins of Independence Day to the Vietnam memorial, from the Daughters of the American Revolution to NAACP. This book was so easy to read b/c it was written by a Pulitzer-Prize winning professional who KNOWS how to engage the reader. It's in chronological order so you can choose the time periods at your discretion to read about. This is a thoroughly comprehensive book, which is almost an Encyclopedia Americana, only in highly interesting narrative form. After reading this book, I felt that I truly understood the nature of the American life and its main historical figures as human beings. Only complaint was that all the photos were b&w, and there weren't enough. NYT Book Review said: "Brilliant, idiosyncratic, presented with superlative style laced with refreshing wit." TIME said: "Fascinating...a subtle and teeming narrative."

This is a very important work to understand how Americans developed their heroes and create national myths. It was suggested by my doctoral advisor as valuable for my research into public history. Kammen explores how select groups and people in American History gain a public reputation and are used to define what it means to be an American. I found this work most helpful in placing Lincoln's rise to fame in the context of other memorial issues around the country.

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