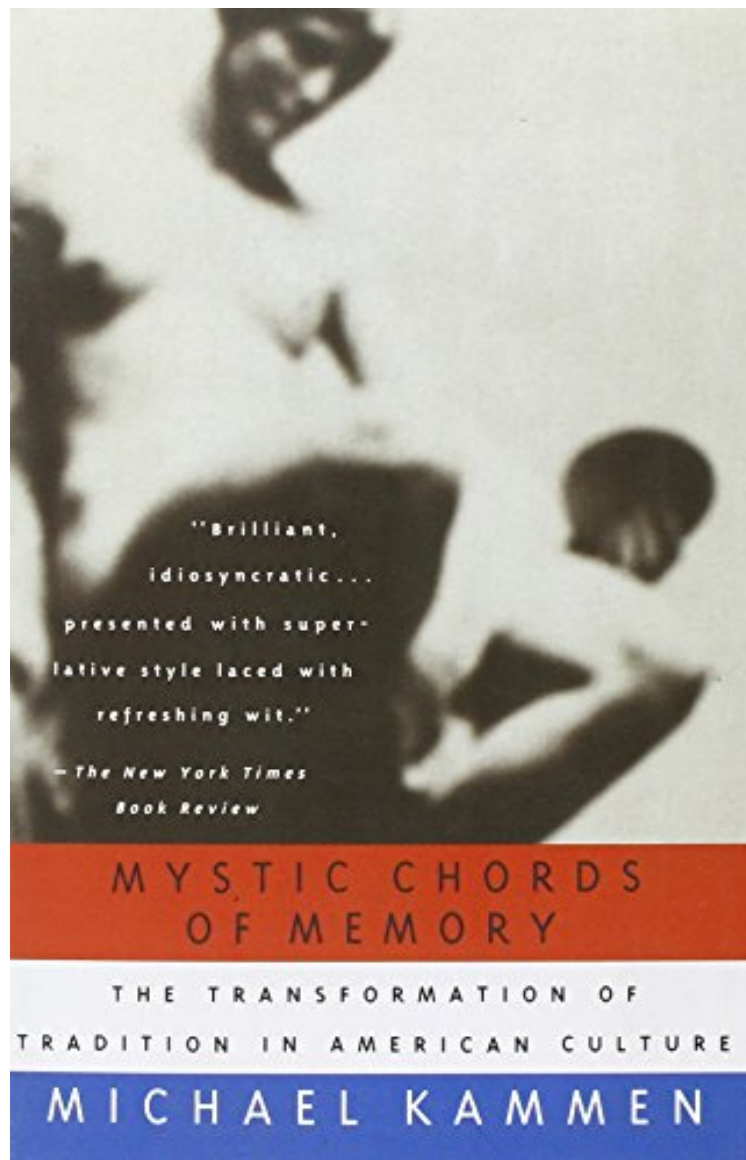


(Free and download) Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture

## Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture

*Michael Kammen*

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**Michael Kammen : Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture:

15 of 18 people found the following review helpful. Is it possible to truly understand the past "as it happened?"By

Roger D. Launius 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 entre 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. 18 of 20 people found the following review helpful. Ground-breaking Panoramic Book on American history By A Customer 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 it's main historical figures as human beings. Only complaint was that all the photos were bw, 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." 4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Mystic Chords By Thomas D. Mackie 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.

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 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

From Publishers Weekly 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 Information, Inc. From Library Journal 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. From Kirkus

sAn ambitious, wonderfully detailed investigation into the shifting perceptions of American cultural identity from Pulitzer Prize-winner (People of Paradox, 1973) Kammen (American History and Culture/Cornell; A Machine That Would Go of Itself, 1986, etc.). Taking his title from Lincoln's First Inaugural Address plea for national unity, Kammen asserts that, particularly in times of upheaval, "a usable past has been needed to give shape and substance to national identity." Thus, the broad chronological division of the book into three postwar periods: 1870-1915, when the trauma of civil war and an influx of immigrants made history a mechanism for social and political unification; 1915-45, during which time the tensions of memory and modernism, populism and elitism, combined to forge a uniquely American aesthetic; and 1945- 90, an era of "amnesia" encompassing an intense interest in things historical and a shocking lack of specific knowledge. Throughout, the author masterfully untangles the threads of myth, tradition, and nostalgia underlying the curious "ambiguities and dualisms" of a nation stubbornly devoted to both past and future vision. Hence, there arose such very American anomalies as Henry Ford following up his transformation of working life and leisure (and his oft-quoted remark that "History is more or less bunk") with obsessive collecting and the creation of two "living" museums. Splendidly inclusive in the best, most delightful vein of intellectual history, in which no cultural artifact is discounted as trivial, Kammen's study offers a liberal sampling of high and low culture-- literature and popular reading material; pageants and parades; art, architectural, and design trends; museums, theme parks and monuments--as well as a nice dollop of historiography and a careful consideration of similar movements abroad. Admirable, perceptive, and refreshingly well balanced--a daunting task superbly accomplished. (One hundred and forty-five illustrations--not seen.) -- Copyright 1991, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.