

## In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture

ISSN 0003-4827

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### Recommended Citation

"In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture." *The Annals of Iowa* 57 (1998), 402-403.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10227>

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*In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture*, by Michael Kammen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. xvi, 277 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$35.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY KENNETH CMIEL, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

Michael Kammen, one of the nation's foremost cultural historians, collects here occasional pieces done in the past decade. These essays are vintage Kammen, full of flowing prose, a bit of whimsy, wide-ranging erudition, and a generous critical spirit. They address themes that Kammen has long been interested in—the place of cultural memory in American history, the role of museums as markers of our heritage, the making and unmaking of national cultural policy, and the ways historians have practiced their craft over the years.

Kammen thinks that cultural memory is important because national history always has an element of myth attached to it. He also thinks it important because it is the point where professional and popular history mingle. He does not want to be an ivory tower academic. This is central to understanding not only Kammen's interest in popular ideas about heritage, but also his interest in museums and his easy prose style. Thinking about history is thinking about public life.

Kammen's prose is decidedly upbeat. While not afraid to be critical, he is wary of a critical tone. While he can be suspicious of business practices, he will also point out contributions that corporations have made to preserving historical memory. There is some wonderful material in the book on the ways that the Great Northern Railway in the mid-1920s encouraged popular understandings of the past of the Great Plains. Kammen might understand how much use of heritage themes by real estate developers whitewashes the past, but he won't toss out recent campaigns entirely. They can serve to popularize history, he argues. And while he is aware of the ways that older versions of the American past ignored certain issues of gender and race, he also defends the idea of some sort of national culture.

One strength of these essays is the wealth of detail Kammen can bring to bear on any particular subject. He knows an enormous amount about museums, the uses of the past, and cultural politics. He is also alive to the interplay of national and local forces, interested not only in the opening of the American wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art but also in the purpose of the Naperville Heritage Society in Naperville, Illinois. Kammen will comment on the symbolic resonance of both the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C., and the Franklin County Courthouse in Hampton,

Iowa (complete with picture). His great erudition allows him to swing effortlessly from the grand to the small, the national to the local.

While there are only fleeting mentions of Iowa in this book, those interested in Iowa history might profit from Kammen's deep interest in and respect for the local. In "Culture and the State in America," Kammen pays attention not only to the national support for the arts in the recent past, but state-level support as well. As important as the emergence of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, he argues, are the numerous state humanities agencies and arts councils that have emerged in recent decades. More attention to state agencies, he contends, will turn out to be better for the arts. Local arts projects are generally less controversial. They may make less of a splash, but they are also less prone to give rise to sensational and distorted accounts in newspapers a half-continent away. Kammen is one of the rare commentators on fights over public funding of the arts who understands the strategic role that state agencies can play in this fight.

Like all such collections, not all the essays come together perfectly. Kammen's long first essay on how personal identity shapes what historians do is full of interesting detail but comes to no real conclusion. Despite such lapses, this book overall is a fine read. Kammen's judgments are full of common sense. For those interested in the ways the nation has envisioned its past—in its museums, history books (popular and academic), and art—this book is full of nuggets worth finding.

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