

# {essays in history}

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## Digging up the Dead: A History of Notable American Reburials

# DIGGING UP THE DEAD



A HISTORY *of* NOTABLE AMERICAN REBURIALS

*Michael Kammen*

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### Reviewed Work(s)

*Digging up the Dead: A History of Notable American Reburials.* By Michael Kammen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Pp. 272. Cloth, \$25.00, Paper \$17.00.

In *Digging up the Dead*, Michael Kammen demonstrates how the requisite peace and permanency of a final resting place initially eluded a number of notable Americans. Kammen invokes compelling questions about the politicization of reburying some of the most famous Americans in history. Spanning a comprehensive timeline beginning with heroes of the Revolutionary War, his wide ranging study includes a motley cast of significant figures. From presidents and politicians, to celebrated writers and other intellectual luminaries, Kammen examines the oftentimes multiple exhumations of individuals such as Edgar Allan Poe, D.H. Lawrence, and Mark Rothko.

Kammen presents vignettes that are bizarre, macabre, and even amusing. He meticulously traces each step of the reburial process, from the deeply political and personal motivations of exhuming human remains to the attendant logistical considerations associated with these elaborate “do-overs.” One of the most intriguing aspects of the text is how the exhumation of notable figures invites a deeper discussion about the rightful claimants of these famous bodies. Kammen deftly illustrates how this undertaking is at once national and familial, as the collective sentiment of a country is brought to bear on the individual wishes of the deceased. The body becomes a highly contested site to which cultural value is ascribed, expected to accommodate the intensely personal wishes of families and the pressing public needs of a region, state, or city. Indeed, besides the motivation to rebury the body in proximity to home or with family, there lies a more incalculable nearness to larger ideologies of race, religion, or patriotism.

Central to Kammen's compelling study is the notion that reburials can serve a restorative function, as in the case of Jefferson Davis, whose body was moved from New Orleans to the capital of the Confederacy (3-7). In this instance, a singular reburial takes on collective meaning for an entire region of the country as Kammen contends that exhumation is part and parcel of rebuilding reputation in death. Reconciliation through reburial can also serve as historical corrective – however belatedly – as in the case of Matthew Henson. An African American explorer who assisted Richard Peary in his famous expedition to the North Pole, Henson was initially buried in a modest and otherwise unremarkable grave. Nearly eight decades after his death, Henson was given a hero's (re)burial at Arlington, an act that sought to correct a racially motivated oversight (186-88). As public perception changes in the court of public opinion or through official proceedings, ensuring that a person's remains have been afforded the proper veneration in death has often been the next logical consideration.

One of the more fascinating elements of Kammen's book is his examination of an American culture that connects corpses with commercialism. His exploration of the commercial draw of having celebrities buried in local cemeteries is evident with individuals such as Jesse James (146-50) and Daniel Boone (129-34). Kammen's examination of this competitive dimension enhances our understanding of how public access to bodies can be highly problematic, whether informed by nostalgia, pride, or morbid curiosity.

The book benefits from rich historical context about larger issues in the social and cultural sphere in the last two centuries. Kammen's inclusion of various newspaper accounts of exhumations is especially illuminating as we come to understand reburials in the larger context of sensational journalism of the nineteenth century. Additionally, the complex role of gender is significant in Kammen's exploration of women in appropriating agency on behalf of the deceased, as we see with the daughter F. Scott Fitzgerald (155-56) and the wife of Frank Lloyd Wright (157-60).

While acknowledging that the American tradition is indebted in part to the classical legacy of reburial history from the Europeans, Kammen makes the case that the American tradition is decidedly different. At the end of the book, Kammen presents a comparative framework of

European reburials, such as those of Joseph Stalin (217-18), Alexandre Dumas (207) and the “Red Baron” Manfred Baron von Richthofen (208-9) to illustrate the differences between a European tradition fraught with more pronounced differences and motivations in reburying the dead. While the U.S. has indeed experienced intense sectional and racial strife, Kammen argues that our young history lacks the ideological ferocity of European dichotomies (socialists versus capitalists; monarchists versus republicans). Ultimately, Kammen’s work demonstrates how reburials are, in effect, a cultural touchstone reflecting a wide spectrum of American sensibilities about death and reconciliation. His insightful narratives are not as illustrative of the dead as they are about how the living impart and allocate meaning. While much extant scholarship about the history of death has focused on cemeteries, the funeral industry, and mourning practices, Kammen’s scholarship is an important and altogether different contribution to the historiography. In exploring the relocation of the dead to fit personal and political intentions, *Digging up the Dead* complicates, if not completely disrupts the idea that death is a permanent, fixed state.

**Miun Gleeson**

*University of Missouri-Kansas City*



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