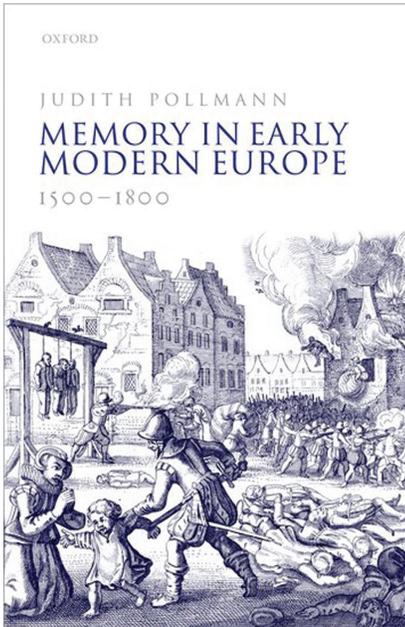


Review

Judith Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 256 pp. ISBN 978-0-198-79755-5.



To say that the history of memory is a booming subject is an understatement. What originally started as an interest in the history of professional historiography has developed into a multi-faceted field that treats all aspects of the ways in which people remember (and, increasingly also, in which they forget). The end of the memory boom is not as yet in sight, as the memory cultures of particular groups of people (often subaltern ones) and the remembrance of particular events are being reconstructed all around the globe.

From the beginning, historians of memory have cared to ground their research on sound theoretical foundations. Various concepts of memory have been coined, especially concerning the relationship between history and memory. One of the basic assumptions of this sub-discipline is that (organic, subjective) memory and (professional, objective) history stand on opposite ends of a linear scale defining how people relate to the past. The move from

memory to history is supposed to be a defining feature of modernity itself. As modern man develops an awareness of continual change, he increasingly experiences a relation of discontinuity towards the past. Or, to quote Pierre Nora, we speak so much of memory because there is so little left of it. As a consequence, the history of memory has largely been written as the history of *modern* memory. Early modern memory, on the other hand, has been described as everything that modern memory is not.

Early modern scholars have, understandably, not been contented with this negative definition. Over the past decades, early modern memory has developed into a historical subject in its own right. All over Europe, the functions and defining features of early modern memory have been studied. Judith Pollmann's book is the first monograph to unite

this wealth of recent research into a comprehensive synthesis. Pollmann is well placed to do so. Between 2008 and 2013 she managed the large-scale research project 'Tales of the Revolt: Memory, Oblivion and Identity in the Low Countries, 1566-1700'. Among other things, the projects has resulted in several PhDs and in the publication of an edited volume which brings together case studies of early modern memory from all over Europe (Erika Kuijpers, Judith Pollmann, Johannes Müller, and Jasper van der Steen (eds.), *Memory Before Modernity. Practices of Memory in Early Modern Europe*, Leiden, Brill, 2013).

In her new book, Pollmann wraps up a number of major new insights on early modern memory, considered both as a historical phenomenon and as a category of analysis. Her aim is twofold. First, to describe what early modern memory looked like and what functions it fulfilled. Second, to indicate what this means for our conception of the relationship between early modern and modern memory. In both ways, her book makes an innovative contribution to the *status quaestionis*. Pollmann departs from a number of established theories of memory by focusing not on intellectual or professional attitudes towards the past, but on actual practices. How was memory *done* in early modern Europe, by whom, and to which ends? These questions are treated in seven thematic chapters devoted to a number of specific practices: from the scripting of the self in egodocuments, the use of anachronism, myths and 'acts of oblivion', to the remembrance of violent events.

The book draws on a rich and varied corpus of sources. Pollmann skillfully interweaves examples taken from secondary literature with material from her original research specialty: the religious history of the Low Countries. The cited evidence mostly concerns England, the Low Countries, France, and Germany, but examples from Italy, Spain, and Central Europe are also included. Without making any claims for completeness, the book convincingly covers a wide geographical and temporal scope. Pollmann studies memory practices on the personal, local, national, and even 'glocal' level. Case studies include such varied examples as the diary entries of a German wine merchant on his changing physical appearance over time, the public remembrance of the story of the Pied Piper in the German village of Hamelin, commemorative processions in Poitiers following divine intervention during a Protestant siege in the Wars of Religion, the development of a national culture of remembrance in the Dutch Republic around civilian suffering in the war against Spain, and the transnational remembrance of the battle of Lepanto in Catholic Europe.

Relying on a multitude of concrete examples, the book creates a vivid picture of the many ways in which early modern people remembered the past. The variety of memory practices shows that generalizing statements on the supposed static and organic character of early modern memory fail to do justice to the subject. Early modern people actively engaged with the past in lots of ways, depending on a range of factors such as their social position, their degree of literacy, and the aims they reached for. Pollmann makes clear that early modern people had a repertoire of memory practices at their disposal, endowing them with a great deal of personal agency. While it is true that the authority of the past as a legitimizing category remained uncontested in early modern society, the past could easily be molded in order to suit present needs. The surest way to introduce innovation in a society oriented towards the perpetuation of its historical legacy was to cloak it as a return to tradition. Likewise, Pollmann cleverly shows that the rampant anachronisms in early modern visual depictions of the past (think of those typical battle scenes from Antiquity

with the soldiers dressed in sixteenth-century garb) often betray a conscious choice on the part of the artist rather than indifference towards historical change. Whether it was advisable to stress the similarities or the differences between the past and the present depended on the circumstances.

Throughout the book, Pollmann uses the cited evidence to cast doubt on various explanatory schemes that she labels the 'modernity thesis'. She shows that supposed 'premodern' and 'modern' attitudes towards the past are not as mutually exclusive as theory would want us to believe. A medieval monk who celebrates progressive change in history, a sixteenth-century diarist who carefully documents changes in fashion throughout his own lifetime and that of his ancestors, a seventeenth-century minister who mourns over the unbridgeable gap between the past and the present brought about by the Reformation: all of these attitudes towards the past seem remarkably modern. Conversely, she shows that many supposedly premodern practices of memory have not at all died out after the age of revolutions. Mythical interpretations of the past by everyday people are as common today as they were several centuries ago, to cite only one example. Once we stop looking mainly at professional or intellectual ways of doing history, it turns out that many ordinary memory practices have simply continued to exist up until today. While not denying that memory underwent major changes over time, especially in the period around 1800, Pollmann does refute the idea that new ways of doing memory replaced older ones. Rather, older ways continued to exist side by side with newer ones. In that sense, she claims that the history of memory is cumulative instead of linear.

To make her point, Pollmann systematically draws contemporary ways of remembering the past into the analysis. Using present-day examples of memory practices, she shows the remarkable continuity with their early modern counterparts. This approach is certainly refreshing. It reminds us that memory, although shaped by historical circumstances, is an inherent human faculty and may therefore retain certain characteristics over very long periods of time. Pollmann cites insights from cognitive psychology in support of this thesis and goes so far as to analyse instances of early modern remembrance from the point of view of posttraumatic stress disorder. Original though this approach is, it also tests the limits of the book's claim. The slope to psychohistory is always a slippery one, if only because the early modern people on whom this contemporary psychological vocabulary is projected have left so notoriously little reflections on their personal feelings and emotions.

Nevertheless, Pollmann very convincingly breaks up traditional schemes of analysis. While demonstrating a profound knowledge of the theoretical literature on the subject, she wisely refrains from positing yet another alternative model of memory's development over time. What her book shows above all, is that such models by necessity come down to an oversimplification of historical reality. By painting a broad panorama of concrete instances of memory work in the early modern period, she reminds us of the richness and variety of this subject, to which few scholars of memory have done justice so far. Her systematical discussion of the forms and functions of memory in early modern European society sets a formidable new standard in the field. She does so in an elegant prose that bespeaks both erudition and an admirable talent for clearness of argument. All of this makes this book a must-read for students of early modern and modern memory alike.