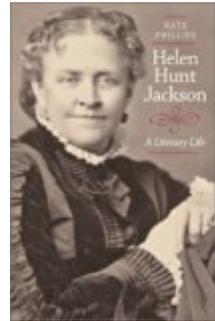


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kate Phillips. *Helen Hunt Jackson: A Literary Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. x + 370 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21804-8.

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Regional and Reform Writer Helen Hunt Jackson

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Kate Phillips gives us the first modern biography of Helen Hunt Jackson, chiefly remembered today as a regional writer of westerns. Jackson's novel *Ramona*, continuously in print for more than a century, is a romantic depiction of the struggle of early Californians—Native American, Spanish and Mexican—to cling to their traditional pastoral life in the face of encroaching American industrialism. Phillips draws on letters and documents made public only relatively recently, to present a comprehensive analysis of Jackson's literary career in the context of her upbringing, her literary influences, her time and place.

Although Jackson is not widely read today, she was one of America's most successful authors during the immediate post-Civil war period, and was praised by Ralph Waldo Emerson as one of the country's greatest poets. Jackson anticipated regional writers like Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Hallock Foote a generation later. Phillips sees *Ramona*, with its "disappointed, deracinated heroes," as the forerunner of the fiction of Nathanael West, Evelyn Waugh, Thomas Pynchon, and Joan Didion. Phillips's biography of Jackson is an in-depth portrayal of her subject and a thorough explanation of how she arrived at her "seminal regional vision" (p. 3).

In her biography, Phillips's focus is on Jackson's literary life, and chooses to present her material to the reader in a somewhat unconventional manner: by genre and chronology. A short introduction gives an overview of Jackson's life, career and literary reputation, not only in

her own day, but in modern times, when a new understanding of sentimental writing suggests that an appeal to women's emotions could inspire them, "to take charge of their lives, even to demand widespread social change" (p. 32).

Most of the book focuses on Jackson's development as a writer. Part Two deals with her family influences, literary (both parents were writers) and emotional. After her parents' early deaths, Jackson learned from guardians and mentors, friends, and her first husband.

Part Three describes her early published work, poetry and essays, which began after the deaths of her husband and children. Helen Hunt (who signed her early work "H. H.") had believed that motherhood was a woman's highest calling, and that professional authorship was possible for her only after she had no more domestic obligations. But Phillips shows that Jackson had been honing her skills for some time in letter writing, and that her first published pieces came surprisingly fast after she decided, at age thirty-four, to enter the literary marketplace. Jackson did not need to write to earn her living, but hoped that her literary output would make the world a better place. Part Four examines Jackson's mature writing, travel pieces, short stories and novels.

While Jackson's place in the American canon—her contributions to regional writing and protest literature—is important, what this reader found compelling was the timeless story of a writer finding her calling. Phillips's exhaustive exploration (she located and studied over 1,300 of Jackson's letters) of the roots of Jackson's craft

and of Jackson's state of mind is as engaging as it is thorough. So, too, is the portrait of a coterie of successful female authors of the time. (For example, Jackson was a friend and correspondent of fellow Amherst native, Emily Dickinson.) Phillips' extensive and varied research is reflected in a long and impressive bibliography.

At times, the author's detail can also appear excessive. In a few places, the book reads like the dissertation it originally was. Phillips's survey of diverse scholarly opinions on the meanings of regionalist writing, for example, is likely to appeal to few outside the field. Although Phillips's organization of the book serves her purpose of examining Jackson's literary life, it leaves the memory-challenged among us flipping back to part 1 to look up the dates of key events.

Jackson's literary legacy is only part of what this

book has to offer. Phillips uses Jackson's work as a lens through which to examine feminism, psychology, and social and intellectual history in the second half of the nineteenth century. For a work that is packed with information, *Helen Hunt Jackson* is highly readable, in part because of Phillips's judicious use of Jackson's own words.

Interestingly, her subject never used the name Helen Hunt Jackson herself, believing that it was wrong to use a first married name after a second marriage.

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