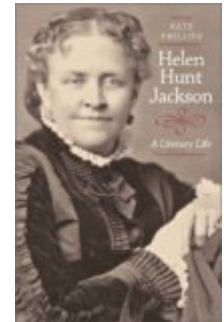


Kate Phillips. *Helen Hunt Jackson: A Literary Life.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. x + 370 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-21804-8.



Reviewed by Eileen V. Wallis

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The lasting impact of Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 novel *Ramona* can be seen in a quick glance across southern California's landscape. Architects of both mansions and mini-malls continue to adapt traditional Spanish mission style for modern use, assuming it to be the most authentically "Californian" of available architectural forms. Hollywood has made four motion pictures based on the book, one of which also produced a hit song of the same name. The *Ramona* Pageant, the theatrical adaptation of Jackson's novel, has been performed in Hemet, California, almost every year since 1923. Indeed, as Kevin Starr points out, *Ramona* powerfully reshaped the imagination of southern California.[1]

But to author Kate Phillips, *Ramona* is much more than a source of inspiration. It is "the founding work in a powerful local [i.e. Californian] dystopian tradition" protesting the impact white Americans had on the lives and culture of California's American Indian and Hispanic populations (p. 3). Helen Hunt Jackson (who never used both surnames during her lifetime, instead using "Helen Hunt," "H.H.," or a variety of pseudonyms)

was an intensely private woman who asked friends and relatives to burn her letters and unfinished manuscripts. Nonetheless Phillips has done an admirable job cobbling together surviving Jackson materials scattered in numerous repositories across the country. Here she has crafted a sensitive portrait of Jackson's life and literature that will be valuable to any scholar seeking to understand Jackson's lasting impact on California and her place in the history of Indian-white relations.

Phillips moves beyond Jackson's best-known book to examine both her life and her larger career as a writer of poetry, travel literature, and fiction. Chapters 1 through 3 focus on Jackson's early life and literary influences, while chapters 4 and 5 examine her early writing career, with an emphasis on her poetry and domestic essays. Chapters 6 through 9 trace Jackson's transition to writing travel essays and fiction, her growing interest in Indian reform work, and the collision of these two interests in *Ramona*. Phillips combines a biographical approach to Jackson's life with literary criticism. She examines how events in Jack-

son's life interacted with her training and experience as an author to produce her unique body of work.

Phillips's book is perhaps most valuable for reexamining Jackson's poetry and shorter works, both of which served as a sort of training ground for *Ramona*. For most of her career Jackson wrote shorter works for the periodicals that routinely outsold books in nineteenth-century America (Jackson did not write her first novel, *Mercy Philbrick's Choice*, until 1876, when she was forty-five). These poems and essays early on cemented Jackson's literary reputation. Indeed, Phillips argues, Jackson was widely considered the era's finest American female poet. Although Phillips does provide excerpts from many of Jackson's poems, it would have bolstered her argument further had she provided longer quotes from critics, but this is a very minor flaw in what is otherwise an excellent chapter.

In addition to poetry, Jackson also published articles recounting her extensive travels. An examination of Jackson as travel writer is vital to understanding her later novels, Phillips argues, because it was here that Jackson first developed her critique of the effects of industrialization on rural America. Jackson did not object to development per se, but rather sought to encourage newcomers to respect the local environment and the "preeminent rights of native residents" (p. 155). Paradoxically Jackson's own presence as a tourist and the publicity her articles provided helped fuel the very transformation Jackson protested. Travel writing also served Jackson in another way: it allowed her to hone her skills at character portraiture and her interest in portraying the "everyday heroism of people" (p. 182). Unfortunately, it was also in her travel writing that Jackson developed the characteristic for which she has since received so much criticism: her portrayal of American Indians, other minorities, and foreigners alike as charming, simple men and women somehow more in touch with the primitive than contempo-

rary white Americans. Phillips characterizes this approach as "romantic racialism," the phenomenon of "building on pseudo-scientific theories of inherent racial differences in order to praise racial minorities for their perceived simplicity and indolence" (p. 179). Phillips does not attempt to excuse this in Jackson or her work. But, by pointing out how widespread romantic racialism was in nineteenth-century literature, she provides a valuable context for understanding how and why Jackson crafted the portraits of non-Anglos in her books.

By looking at Jackson's entire body of work, Phillips skillfully defends the author from the charge of peddling stories that can appeal only to the unsophisticated. After all, Phillips points out, "the confusion between sentimentalism and realism evident in Jackson's fiction was endemic to her era" (p. 188). Phillips instead makes a persuasive case that Jackson should be understood not as a sentimentalist, but rather as a regionalist writer. As evidence of this Phillips points to both Jackson's travel literature and to her sensitive portrait of California in *Ramona*.

It is in her discussion of the circumstances surrounding Jackson's two most famous works, *A Century of Dishonor* (1881) and *Ramona* (1884), that Phillips's approach of combining biography with literary study bears the most fruit. In spite of her success, Phillips asserts, by the late 1870s Jackson had begun to search for a more concrete moral purpose for her writing. Fortunately, her search coincided with a visit to Boston in 1879. There she attended a lecture by Ponca Chief Standing Bear and his translator, Omaha Indian Susette La Flesche. Jackson, who had never exhibited any interest in reform, was transformed by the experience. For the next six years until her death Jackson worked as what she herself called an advocate for Indians' rights. Indeed, Phillips casts Jackson as a proto-muckraker, exposing the unfulfilled government promises and rampant racism in Indian-white relations decades before

the term was coined. Phillips divides Jackson's career as reformer into two phases: the first produced *A Century of Dishonor*, the second, *Ramona*. Phillips reveals that Jackson, burning with righteous indignation, wrote *A Century of Dishonor*, a history of the U.S. government's treatment of Indians, in the space of only a few months. Although some historians have since accused Jackson's book of helping to bring about the devastating Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887, which instituted individual ownership of Indian land, Phillips argued that nowhere in either her published or private writing did Jackson express a wish for such an outcome. Like most people of her day Jackson was fairly ethnocentric, Phillips admits, but it must be remembered that for her era she was ahead of her time in her interest in Indian issues.

In 1881, *Century Magazine* invited Jackson to write a series of travel articles about southern California, an event that launched the second phase of her reform career. Once there Jackson became especially interested in the plight of local "mission" Indians, who had been dispossessed of most of their land and who lived on the fringes of California society. While in southern California, Jackson produced several articles on the region but also observed first-hand the devastating impact American rule had had on Indian communities. Determined to help in any way possible, Jackson returned to Los Angeles in 1883 as a special agent for the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. With Abbot Kinney as her co-commissioner she studied the possibility of the government setting aside reservations for the local Indians and of the government intervening to help prevent Indians from being displaced by aggressive landowners. As her report slowly wound its way through the corridors of power in Washington, Jackson decided to use her literary talents to publicize what was happening to southern California's Indians. During her 1881 trip to Los Angeles she had struck up a friendship with Antonio F. Coronel, a Mexican-born rancher and politician who had

once been elected mayor of Los Angeles under American rule. Coronel, Phillips writes, did more to shape *Ramona* than any other individual in Jackson's life. He arranged for her to visit Rancho Camulos, the model for the ranches in her novel. Moreover, Coronel's own idealized descriptions of California's Spanish past reinforced Jackson's tendency toward romanticism. Jackson also consulted historical sources that encouraged a romantic view of the Franciscan missions. But, Phillips is careful to point out, Jackson's romanticism was well-intentioned: she intended her *Ramona* to be such a noble and brave heroine that white readers would empathize with her. The fact that *Ramona* became one of the most popular novels of the late-nineteenth century is proof that the novel did indeed connect with white audiences. But to Jackson's chagrin reviewers became the first in a long line to ignore *Ramona's* message about the plight of California Indians in favor of lauding the perceived romanticism of Californio life (again, it would have been interesting had Phillips provided quotes from some of these reviews). Unfortunately, although Jackson did get to see *Ramona* become a hit, she did not live long enough to see the recommendations in her report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs take root. The new law, "An Act for the Relief of the Mission Indians in the State of California," would not be passed until 1891, six years after Jackson's death.

By the end of this book there is no doubt in either Phillips's or the reader's mind that Jackson would have been very angry at how *Ramona* has been misinterpreted in California. However misguided and ethnocentric some of her efforts on behalf of American Indians may seem to us today, there can be no doubt that Jackson believed passionately in the need for white Americans to redress the mistreatment of native populations. In her zeal to help, Jackson enlisted both her literary reputation and her skill as a writer, and produced two of the best-known works of nineteenth-century western American literature, *A Century of Dishonor* and *Ramona*. That California is still strug-

gling to come to terms with the legacies detailed in these books is testament to Helen Hunt Jackson's historical significance and to her lasting impact on the hearts and minds of white Americans.

Note

[1]. Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 55.

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