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The literary influence of Helen Hunt Jackson's novel Ramona (1884) remains strong to this day for promotional efforts in Southern California. The aura of Spanish romance evoked in her popular novel suffuses the imagined landscapes of the entire region, and even animates tourism development in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands. In San Diego and Orange Counties, the former Mexican ranches at Camulos and Guajome compete for the claim to be the “real” home of Ramona described in Jackson's book. During the 1910s in Old Town San Diego, the city's Mexican era historical district, the companies of John D. Spreckels transformed the Casa de Estudillo into “Ramona’s Marriage Place” for tourism, replete with a wishing well, carreta, and a Spanish oven known as an horno. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of postcards promoted the site to such an extent that this author has found them in antique stores in tiny corners of rural Oklahoma. The town of Hemet in Riverside County has held an annual Ramona Pageant every year since 1923 to make the Spanish fantasy past of Jackson's Ramona an enduring regional mythology. Jackson's novel, as well as the early twentieth-century The Mission Play, written by John Steven McGroarty and performed at Mission San Gabriel, influenced the remaking of Olvera Street in Los Angeles during the 1930s. The effusive romance of the novel was so infectious, said Carey McWilliams in 1945, that Southern Californians had “accepted the charming Ramona as a folk figure, but completely rejected the Indians still living in the area.” In Jackson's mind, Ramona was a literary vehicle to publicize the contemporary predicament of both the Mission Indians and common Mexican American people of Southern California. McWilliams believed her Report on the Condition and Needs of the Mission Indians of California (1883), but especially A Century of Dishonor (1881) was “a valuable document” and Jackson did help “arouse a momentary flurry of interest in Mission Indians.” In Ramona, Jackson imagined an egalitarian future through social criticism of past wrongs. This naked fact, of course, is certainly lost underneath the tourism and culture industries in Southern California, which perennially promote misleading history and reproduce conventional understandings of Southern California throughout the United States.

In Helen Hunt Jackson: A Literary Life, Kate Phillips argues that Jackson's fiction, travel writing, and social criticism were the culmination of a life spent searching for sympathy among the less fortunate, travel to assuage feelings of rootlessness, and perseverance in the face of disappointment and loss. Phillips handles with great sensitivity the span of Jackson's life, and her biography supersedes previous Jackson scholarship. It is a major revision of Helen Hunt Jackson's life and an outstanding contribution to women's history, the cultural transition from the antebellum period to the industrial era, and American literary history. As the most influential and highly-paid female writer of her generation by 1881, Phillips admirably reclaims the stature of Jackson from parochial treatments of her writing six years before her death in 1885. By reconsidering the sources and studying more than “thirteen hundred letters” from the author's life, Phillips was able to “correct a number of misperceptions about Jackson
and to understand her life and career in new ways." Phillips creatively paints a portrait of Jackson's life using phases of the author's literary awakening, rather than chronology employed by traditional academic biographers. What emerges is a highly-readable, well-integrated, and sensitive story of a remarkable woman's journey from humble beginnings to literary acclaim.

Helen Maria Fiske was born in Amherst, Massachusetts on October 14, 1830 to Nathan Welby Fiske, a professor of Greek and Latin at Amherst College, and Deborah Vinal Fiske, a homemaker and author of instructional children's stories. Reared in an orthodox Calvinist household, the young Helen imbibed the pious worldview that was so much a part of the New England Protestant tradition. Submission and duty to the strictures of an angry God, and hard work and cheerfulness in the face of adversity were defining elements of her childhood. By 1841, Helen's parents were determined to school her outside the confines of Amherst. An ambitious, bright, and curious young girl, the eleven year-old Fiske lived in Hadley and Charlestown with family friends where she pursued the proper instruction of Protestant education. Away from her family, Jackson became overwhelmed by feelings of homesickness. This would later influence her regionalist writing.

When viewing her later Indian reform writings, it was somewhat odd that Jackson would develop an interest in social activism. Reared in rural western Massachusetts, the environment of Helen Fiske's Protestant moral education lay just outside the "burned-over-district" of upstate New York and the upper Midwest, where the Second Great Awakening kindled during the 1840s. The moral orientation of evangelical Protestantism preached by Charles Grandison Finney and abolitionist William Weld defined the antebellum quest for a perfect society and the Christian ethics undergirding social activism. At this time, such considerations eluded the young woman. The death of her mother in 1844 and the passing of her father in 1847 sent Jackson into a period of intense mental anguish and depression accompanied by feelings of loneliness. But she did learn from her father a life of active industry devoted to God. From her mother, Helen imbibed equal parts skepticism and cheerful Christian submission. Phillips believes that Deborah encouraged Helen to imitate "her own inventive, pictorial manner of writing," which shaped Jackson's power of imagination. From the age of sixteen, Helen became the ward of Julius Palmer, a close family friend and Boston lawyer. Her maternal grandfather David Vinal supported her and her sister financially. It was the ambition to persevere in the face of adversity, and the independence such survival entails, that laid the foundation for Jackson's success.

The early literary career of the young Helen Fiske began in 1849 after she left the moralism and humdrum of the Ipswich Female Seminary and headed for New York City to attend the Abbott Institute. The diversity of city life and the undogmatic Christianity of John Abbott allowed her horizons to broaden and her literary ambition to flourish. Like her custodian Julius Palmer, Abbott encouraged Helen to develop her considerable, "God-given" talents at writing. Jackson spent a year-and-a-half teaching at the Institute while indulging heavily in "solitary study." Both John and Jacob Abbott pursued profitable Christian-inspired writing, the independence of which made a favorable impression upon the fledgling young student. In 1851, Helen moved to Albany, New York with her custodian's family, Ray and Ann Palmer, a home that she believed was "the pleasantest she had ever known." She also met a young Amherst student that year named Henry Root. Although not a romantic relationship, the sentiment and intensity of the correspondence shows Jackson to be an expressive and
disciplined writer. Like many talented and ambitious women of the pre-Civil War generation, Jackson felt constrained by both Christian duty and its insistence upon feminine subjugation to men. Phillips explains that “it was the intellectual life of the ‘scholar’ - the literary life - that seemed to Helen most admirable among the several choices open to her.” Her letters to Root allude to the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jane Austen, Goethe, and Shakespeare. She told her confidant that the view of life of Ralph Waldo Emerson was “thrilling, and awakening, even though it does not always prove – practical.”7 Like many women with accomplished intellects and career ambitions that would come after her, such as Jane Addams and Edna St. Vincent Millay, Jackson strove to remain fiercely focused upon her avocation while balancing both family and romantic love. However, she did not exhibit a rebelliousness similar to Addams and especially Millay. Jackson strove for literary dedication and distinction within the norms between men and women shaped by the pre-Civil War generation.8

In the winter of 1851, Jackson met Edward Hunt, her future husband and brother of the New York governor. She was drawn to Hunt by his handsome looks and a soulful connection born of the fact that “both of them were orphans.”9 Although she was happy in her marriage to Hunt, he often was absorbed with his duties working for the Army Corp of Engineers. But he was very supportive of her literary endeavors and introduced Helen to Katherine Wormley, Anne Lynch Botta, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Moncure Conway. With her husband often absent from home, Jackson found herself alone and independent, but with plenty of time to pursue her interest in poetry and literature. In the 1860s, she experienced incredible loss. Edward died in 1863, followed two years later by the death of their son Rennie. With the horrors of the Civil War as a backdrop to this dark decade, Jackson developed intimate friendships with Moncure Conway and Thomas Higginson, whose radical brand of Unitarianism assuaged Helen's pained heart. Both ministers stewarded Jackson's literary career and instilled an urgent sense of social activism in the young writer, for both were outspoken revolutionary abolitionists. Phillips reveals admirably the influence of Higginson on Helen's literary career. He believed that publication in America's flourishing, eastern literary magazines was vitally important to establish a reputation as a writer. Although the literary marketplace was highly competitive, he urged Jackson to develop work in prose, poetry, short fiction, fiction, and eventually non-fiction. Her devotion to Higginson was so strong that it soured her friendship with Charlotte Cushman, America's most famous stage actress of the late nineteenth century.

Throughout the 1870s, Helen Hunt Jackson became part of the Boston and New York literary scene, where she forged friendships with the most important writers and editors of the era. She received critical acclaim for her writing with publication in the top newspapers and literary magazines of the era, such as Scribner's Monthly, The Atlantic, Harper's Monthly, the Nation, and the Century Magazine (which absorbed Scribner's). When Jackson first met Ralph Waldo Emerson in Newport, Rhode Island in 1868, she became overwhelmed by his praise for her work. Phillips explains that “Emerson remained one of Jackson's staunchest supporters, most admiring her denser and more cerebral poems, whether or not they specifically demonstrated any Transcendentalist influence.”10 He believed her to be the greatest living poet in the United States.

In the late 1860s, Jackson excelled at poetry, not quite confident that prose offered her creative possibilities. Many of her earliest poems appeared in the New York Independent. Primarily Scribner’s Monthly, she published short fiction about heroines
who were productive and cheerful under the pseudonym “Saxe Holm.” Plagued by tuberculosis and an easy restlessness, Jackson was fond of changing her environment. She was fond of rural exploration, especially in New England and later in her adopted home of Colorado Springs. Jackson developed a keen eye for “local color” and the life of rural inhabitants. It was through her travel essays and prose, argues Phillips, that Jackson “gradually discovered her deepest literary concerns.” Her early New England travel sketches depict a rural nostalgia for a countryside fast disappearing under the pressure of industrialism. She admired the California regionalist poet Joaquin Miller for his power to describe new places in the west. In 1875, she married William Sharpless Jackson, an executive with the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, in Colorado Springs. Despite their differences, William was a pillar of support for his wife’s literary endeavors. His kindness allowed her regionalist writing to assume a critical stance that separated it from mere “local color” pieces that expressed a syrupy sentimentalism or blustery boosterism.

Although her travel essays on California and Colorado without doubt promoted visitation to rural places (thereby spoiling their Edenic qualities), Phillips believes “Jackson’s concern for the preservation of Colorado’s early lifeways sets her essays apart from the work of several other famous travel writers” and that her “western travel writings demonstrate more race tolerance than those of her peers.” Jackson sympathized with the Indians and ethnic Mexicans who had been displaced and disenfranchised by the extractive industrialism of 1870s Colorado and the coarse racist attitudes and actions of white pioneers. Despite her “ethnocentric” Protestant biases, Jackson felt empathy for those wronged and blamed whites for the demoralization of the unfortunate. As a result, her travel essays often describe Indians and other peoples of the west in a favorable light, as innocent victims of westward expansion and unlimited greed. She felt an affinity with those displaced or wronged. Phillips notes that her understanding “owes a good deal to her relationship” with William Jackson, whose family had been antislavery activists. It is this portrayal of Jackson by Phillips that will surely fire debate in scholarly circles in western history. It is an incontestable fact, however, that this was her point of view regarding the indigenous and Spanish-descent peoples of the west, not unlike Charles F. Lummis, the founder of the Southwest Museum, who described Indians and ethnic Mexicans, but nonetheless believed both groups were citizens by name and law. The wellspring of Jackson’s concern for the displaced and disenfranchised emerged from her conversion to Unitarianism, her protest against the incursions of industrialism, her husband William, and her introduction in Boston to the Ponca Chief Standing Bear in 1879. Phillips believes Indian reform helped unearth her deeper concerns as “she struggled to find a more concrete moral purpose for her writing.” Through the consciousness-raising tour of Standing Bear, Jackson also met Omaha Indian Susette La Flesche (known as “Bright Eyes”) and her husband Francis. Influenced by the land cause embraced by the Poncas and Susette La Flesche’s call for ordinary Americans to remedy the injustices done to Indians, Jackson published A Century of Dishonor (1881). She believed the “great difficulty with the Indian problem is not with the Indian, but with the Government and people of the United States.” In the end, it made “little difference where one opens the record of the history of Indians; every page and every year has its dark stain. The story of one tribe is the story of all.”

With much praise for A Century of Dishonor, Jackson received offers to write travel essays about Southern California from Thomas Bailey Aldrich, the editor of Harper’s
Monthly, and Charles Dudley Warner, editor at the Century Magazine. Naturally, her visits into the California backcountry led to an interest in the condition of the region’s “Mission” Indian bands. In 1882, Jackson and Abbott Kinney of Los Angeles (the developer of Venice Beach) received appointments to investigate the conflict for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. She told Warner that “There is not in all the Century of Dishonor, so black a chapter, as the history of these Mission Indians.” They were “peaceable farmers for a hundred years,” argued Jackson, “driven out of good adobe houses and the white men who had driven them out, settling down calm and comfortable in the houses! - What do you think of that?” The report she and Kinney submitted to the BIA recommended that all treaties protecting Mission Indian lands become inviolate and suggested the Bureau ask, “What the Indians’ own feelings are about going on reservations.”\(^{17}\) When both of her Indian reform tracts fell on deaf ears in the literary marketplace, Jackson decided that romance and social protest fiction might tell the story better. The result was her acclaimed novel *Ramona* (1884), which fictionalized the injustices done to the Mission Indians and ethnic Mexicans of the region by the unlimited avarice of white society.

In this fascinating re-evaluation of Jackson’s Indian reform work, Phillips places Jackson as a key figure in the history of American social activism. Although field scholars in western history have shown the Euro-American biases of social reform and progressivism in the West, Phillips paints Jackson within the current trends in western cultural history and ethnohistory, where Indian-White encounters sometimes created social and political networks that were beneficial for both peoples. With much evidence, Phillips shows the relationship between Jackson’s actions and words. Helen Hunt Jackson joined other Euro-Americans such as anthropologists James Mooney, Áléš Hrdlička, and John Peabody Harrington and regional promoters such as Edgar Hewett, Jesse Nusbaum, and George Wharton James who viewed native peoples with sympathy and believed the injustices done to native peoples were stains on American democracy. James later heaped praise on the work of Jackson for her “indictment of churches, citizens, and the general government, for their crime of supineness in allowing our acknowledged wards to be seduced, cheated, and corrupted.” The works of Jackson, said James, “should be read by every honest American.”\(^{18}\) Phillips does well to reevaluate and place Jackson in the context of these figures.

The quality of Jackson’s regionalist writings, especially *Ramona*, has been viewed as colonialist, racially-biased, and overly sentimental depictions of the romance for the mission and rancho era. Phillips certainly notes that Jackson’s understanding of the Mission era was heavily biased and inaccurate, especially her depiction of benevolent Franciscan friars and kind, paternal rancheros. Nonetheless, Phillips believes “Ramona more clearly and unequivocally advocates the rights of Native Americans than any other nineteenth-century novel written by a European American.”\(^{19}\) In the late nineteenth century literary marketplace, Southern regionalism and Civil War memoirs dominated reading preferences and American memory. Thomas Nelson Page and the Plantation School of sentimental literature shaped racial perceptions of newly freed African Americans throughout the country. Key to this genre was the recreation of black dialect for racist ends. Where Nelson Page and other prejudiced southern regionalists used the dialect novel to render African Americans poorly, Phillips reveals that through *Ramona*, Jackson expressed solidarity with “oppressed peoples” by avoiding the recreation of local dialects. In fact, she turned-the-tables on the oppressors. Phillips explains that “only white American settlers speak in dialect in the
novel, whereas the words of Indian, Mexican, and Spanish characters are set down in heightened, formal English, a language intended to distinguish them as the societal ‘norm,’ the legitimate offspring of the land.” This fact, however, is certainly lost on close literary readings of Jackson’s work. She might fit within a regionalist tradition established by Albion W. Tourgée, the writer and Union war veteran that best represented the emancipationist vision in the South and lampooned the insincerity of sectional reconciliation.20

Helen Hunt Jackson: A Literary Life by Kate Phillips is an outstanding biography of a brilliant woman. For readers of this Journal, the book well reveals the phase of Jackson’s life spent in California and the evocative regional mythology of Southern California that still lures.

NOTES

7. Phillips, 73.
15. Phillips, 222.

