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Helen Hunt Jackson and Her Indian Reform Legacy. By Valerie Sherer Mathes. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990. 253 pages. \$27.95 cloth.

Although Ralph Waldo Emerson called Helen Hunt Jackson the "greatest American woman poet" (p. 22), if she is remembered at all today, it is for her prose works on Indian affairs. Highly praised during her lifetime, Jackson served Indian policy reformers, after her death in 1885, as a Protestant equivalent of a patron saint, whose name was frequently invoked to dignify and justify the cause. Today, Jackson's work has been all but forgotten, an eclipse of reputation which Valerie Sherer Mathes wrote this book to remedy. Mathes intended "to faithfully present her influence upon her contemporary Indian reformers, thus restoring her to her rightful position as a prominent nineteenth-century author and reformer" (p. ix), and she largely succeeds in this effort. The book focuses less on the biography of Helen Hunt Jackson than it does on the second half of the title, *Her Indian Reform Legacy*.

Mathes, who teaches American Indian history at City College of San Francisco, devoted ten years of research to this task, and her thorough exploration of archives and secondary works provides a strong foundation for this book. During this decade, Mathes produced a steady stream of solidly researched, clearly written articles, mostly focused on the primary context for this topic, women involved in Indian policy reform in the late nineteenth century. To prepare readers to appreciate Jackson, the first chapter of the book succinctly summarizes both the reform context and the history of California's mission Indians, upon whom Jackson focused much of her investigative work and literary effort.

In the next four chapters, Mathes carefully delineates the intense involvement in Indian affairs that consumed the last six years of Jackson's life. Only two pages are devoted to the forty-nine years Jackson lived before she attended a lecture by Ponca chief Standing Bear; this was the event that converted her to the Indian reform cause in 1879. Mathes describes in detail how Jackson, never an activist before this time, used her considerable literary talents and editorial connections to publicize her interpretation of the "Indian Problem" and to criticize those who disagreed, notably secretary of the interior Carl Schurz.

Jackson, previously best known for her poetry, short stories, and travelogues, delved full force into investigative reporting. Seven months of intensive library research produced *A Century of*

Dishonor (1881), Jackson's exposé of this nation's shameful record of abuse of its first inhabitants. Then, on a magazine assignment for a series of articles about California's Spanish missions, Jackson's increased awareness of contemporary Indian affairs led her to focus on the descendants of the mission converts who were threatened with homelessness by increased Anglo development. Jackson's persistence led to her official appointment (with a male colleague) as a special government agent charged with surveying the mission Indian settlements, enumerating population, and seeking lands that could become their reservations. Mathes notes that this report, with its specific recommendations for redress, was not acted upon by Congress until 1891 and by then was too little, too late to protect Indian lands, lives, and cultures effectively.

Mathes then explains the genesis of Jackson's best known work, *Ramona* (1884), which its author hoped would be as effective as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in winning widespread emotional commitment to the Indian cause as Stowe had for abolition. While immediately popular, and still in print today, *Ramona* did not have the effect its author envisioned. Mathes believes this is due to several factors, some of which were failures of art (romance overwhelmed reform—the happy ending softened the edge of outrage—and the protagonists appeared culturally more Mexican than Indian), and some, failures of reality: The American public was not ready to revise its stereotypical view of Indians and accept culpability for their impending destruction.

Ten months after *Ramona* appeared, Jackson died of stomach cancer, but Mathes continues her story in three chapters that emphasize Jackson's influence on, and her differences from, the mainstream of organized Indian policy reform. Mathes clearly demonstrates how Jackson's work inspired activity in mission Indian affairs by the leading Indian reform organizations of the late nineteenth century, although these groups were more focused on evangelism and cultural assimilation than she had been. The Indian Rights Association provided badly needed legal assistance, and branches of the Women's National Indian Association sent missionaries, nominated and supported field matrons, and provided some medical assistance. These chapters admirably untangle complicated webs of individuals, groups, and events, and carry the story of the mission Indians forward to the turn of the twentieth century with, unfortunately, little improvement in their situation.

While Mathes refers to her work as a biography, this book does

not provide much information about Jackson's life apart from her involvement in Indian affairs. Of recent books covering this era, this one is most comparable to William T. Hagan's *The Indian Rights Association: The Herbert Welsh Years, 1882-1904* (1985). Like Hagan, Mathes relies on the documentary evidence, particularly correspondence, and keeps her work focused on public events, not on private lives. Welsh and Jackson share similar positions in these works, as central figures in the action, but neither of their historians chose to probe their more private thoughts and feelings.

Joan Mark's biography of another white woman active with Jackson in the Indian cause, *A Stranger in Her Native Land: Alice Fletcher and the American Indian* (1988) is a whole-life history and a much different book from this one, focusing on Fletcher's personal life, motivations, and problems as well as her public achievements. Perhaps the origin of Mathes's book as a dissertation helps explain the absence of such speculative interpretation and her steady focus on a specific, crucial segment of Jackson's public career and influence. Mark deals more pointedly with issues of gender affecting Fletcher's life than Mathes does with Jackson, perhaps because Fletcher, who remained single, was more noticeably affected by gender constraints. Mathes does emphasize that Jackson stretched the limits of the "true womanhood" model of femininity while still honoring it; however, while she mentions instances of sexism that Jackson experienced and notes the novelist's dismissal of a woman's criticism of her as unimportant, Mathes does not elaborate on these themes.

Other works on Jackson have focused more on literary analysis of her work, so this account of her historical importance and influence provides a significant and needed balance. Mathes avoids any ventures into literary criticism herself; in fact, she does not fully summarize the plot of *Ramona*, which might have helped readers unfamiliar with the work understand the critical comments, most from the 1880s, that Mathes quotes. Although the novel is still available as an inexpensive paperback, my venture into our computerized card catalog showed that more libraries in the state university system in Florida have Mathes's book on their shelves than own *Ramona*, a clear example of the situation Mathes wrote to remedy.

In summary, I believe this book should do much to help revise the reputation of Helen Hunt Jackson as an influential reformer and writer of substance. Mathes points out Jackson's stress on the need for restoring the Indian land base, a position in marked

contrast to that of most of her reform contemporaries, who pushed for individual allotment and public release of "surplus" Indian holdings to speed acculturation. After her death, reformers honored Jackson as a martyr to the cause, as they attempted to change the situation of the mission Indians she loved. Readers join Mathes in wondering whether, had Jackson lived and remained unafraid of controversy, she might have used her influence to temper the assimilationist evangelism of her colleagues in the movement. This is an important book that raises crucial questions about the consistent level of conflict in Indian policy reform of the period, and the varieties of effective tactics reformers chose to use.

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Our Bit of Truth: An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature. Edited by Agnes Grant. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Pemmican Publications, 1990. 347 pages. \$19.95 cloth.

Native studies director Agnes Grant has compiled a valuable collection of myths, legends, poetry, biography, short stories, excerpts from novels, and memoirs representing the major Canadian tribes, exploring their multifaceted themes from pre-European contacts to the present. The reader is treated to a bountiful feast. Much can be learned about humanity from the myths and legends, which can guide one to cope with the complexities and crises of life: The trickster coyote has survived humankind because of his cunning. One has to admire the imaginative skills of the ancient storytellers, who were able to keep audiences in suspense while retaining the flavor of ancient lore.

The experience of living with racial discrimination in an integrated world has led native people into many painful episodes and created in them a desire for both self-expression and self-determination. As Cree poet Sheila Erickson pleads,

don't rhyme the words too closely
when you tell our story
leave time and space for us to install
our bit of truth
to add another line or word
each man his own