“My ‘Century of Dishonor’ and ‘Ramona’ are the only things I have done of which I am glad now,” wrote Helen Hunt Jackson to her friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson a few weeks before her death in 1885. “The rest is of no moment.” For too long, critics have in effect taken Jackson at her word, acknowledging the importance of Ramona in popular culture but criticizing first the book’s romanticism and then, more recently, its insufficiently political response to the plight of Native Americans. In her excellent new biography Helen Hunt Jackson: A Literary Life, Kate Phillips goes well beyond the Ramona phenomenon to provide a satisfying and well-researched account of all of Jackson’s life, one that restores to modern readers the prolific popular author whose writing Emily Dickinson admired and whom Ralph Waldo Emerson considered the best poet on the continent.

Briskly presenting the principal facts of Jackson’s life in the first chapter, Phillips focuses on the phases of Jackson’s career rather than maintaining a strictly chronological arrangement of the material. Thus, the early chapters detail the young Helen Fiske’s youth and literary education, followed by her first forays into the literary marketplace, while later chapters describe her subsequent career as a writer in various genres: poetry and domestic essays, travel writing, short stories and novels, and Indian reform work. Noting that Jackson was “widely considered America’s finest female poet” (p. 119) and “was the only person of letters to offer unstinting praise for Dickinson’s poetry as she wrote it” (p. 144), Phillips assesses Jackson’s poetry judiciously, seeing its technical versatility offset by its occasional lapses into a sentimentality that Jackson tried to avoid. As Jackson herself did, Phillips distinguishes between the popular stories written under the pseudonym “Saxe Holm” and more serious work, such as her autobiographical novel Mercy Philbrick’s Choice (1876). Phillips shows that the mixture of realism and sentimentalism in Jackson’s work owed much not only to the era’s mingling of the two but to Jackson’s habit of tempering realistic representation with the philosophy of cheerfulness in the face of adversity that she had adopted after the early deaths of her parents, her first husband, and her two sons. Despite the focus on Jackson’s literary career, Phillips does full justice to the busy, crowded life that Jackson led, one filled with illness, incessant travel, and relationships with the best minds of her age, including a close friendship with Higginson. Phillips’s careful reading of sources such as the “more than thirteen
hundred” (p. 4) letters Jackson wrote to friends, most previously unknown, sheds light on many parts of Jackson’s life, including Jackson’s movement from the unthinking class and racial prejudices of her era to the more tolerant ideas encouraged by her second husband, William Sharpless Jackson.

Phillips sees Jackson first and foremost as a regionalist; for example, she shows that throughout her career Jackson expressed the regionalist writer’s ambivalence about the incursions of progress and showed “a sense of solidarity” (p. 39) with, rather than condescension for, those she described. This regionalist sensibility, together with a lifetime of traveling and encountering other cultures, prepared Jackson well for taking action after hearing about the plight of the Ponca tribe from Standing Bear in 1879; if the results, first A Century of Dishonor (1881) and then Ramona (1884), failed to achieve the social justice Jackson fought for, it was not for lack of effort on Jackson’s part. As a welcome contemporary reassessment of Jackson, one that supersedes Ruth Odell’s classic Helen Hunt Jackson: [H. H.] (1939) and builds on such modern studies as Valerie Sherer Mathes’s Helen Hunt Jackson and Her Indian Reform Legacy (1990), Helen Hunt Jackson: A Literary Life takes its place not only as a new standard biography of the author but also as an important work for those interested in nineteenth-century American regionalism.

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This book will be very valuable to people interested in culinary history, the literature of gastronomy, and the anthropology of food. It focuses on the history and culture of Mexican food during nineteenth-century California and relies heavily on the recipes of Encarnación Pinedo, who was the first Mexican to write a cookbook on California Mexican cooking. The book is divided into four sections. The first is an essay by Victor Valle, in which he provides a close reading and cultural analysis of Encarnación’s recipe book, situated in a particular historical moment. Dan Strehl’s essay next presents an impressive historical analysis of the recipe book and relates it to several precursor texts that influenced the production of this valuable gastronomic contribution. The third section deals with Encarnación’s Cocinero Español, “The Spanish Cook,” incorporating