

P R E F A C E

ABOUT ten years ago I first heard of Hugo Reid, the mysterious Scotch *paisano*,¹ from an old friend of my father's. John Tracy Gaffey, himself an Irish *paisano*, was then living the gracious life of a past generation in his time-worn *adobe*² residence, Hacienda la Rambla, at San Pedro. On one of our frequent visits to the Gaffey home, "Don Juan" drew me into a dim recess of his library which was a cache of early Californiana almost as fascinating as his own mind. Burrowing into a pile of papers and manuscripts, he miraculously found what he was looking for—a bundle of letters yellowed by age but easily legible. Handing them to me, with no cautioning, he said they were mine to use as long as I liked, adding that an interesting study might be made from them, of an "original" who had played an important part in the California scene during the colorful *hacendado*³ period ended by the great Gold Rush in 1849.

Careful perusal of the letters revealed that they had been written between 1836 and 1852 by Hugo Reid, an educated Scotchman with a keen sense of humor, to his *estimado amigo*, "Don Abel" Stearns, originally a New Englander. The whole correspondence seemed like an intimate conversation between friends who were equally at home in the English and Spanish languages. And I soon found out that Reid and Stearns had been two of the most influential men

¹ Superior figures refer to notes on pp. 287-290.

of their day. Their careers ran parallel, so far as they came to the Pacific coast in the 'twenties, engaged in trade at a time when individual enterprise was rewarded by possessions and power as seldom before or since, settled down within a few miles of each other as *hacendados* in southern California—Reid in San Gabriel and Stearns in Los Angeles,—and held public office repeatedly. Both became Mexican citizens and Catholics in order to own land and marry native Californians. Reid's wife was an Indian woman named Victoria, of the once-powerful Comicrabit family; and Stearns married the lovely Arcadia, daughter of Don Juan Bandini.⁴ Both men played parts in the Mexican War, mined for gold, and attended the constitutional convention which achieved statehood for California. Hugo Reid died in '52, twenty years before his *compadre*."

Such a correspondence as theirs could not be duplicated today, when messages usually are transmitted in a more transitory manner—over the telephone and in casual conversation. Automobiles, moving swiftly on smooth streets, have cut distances into a fraction of what they seemed a hundred years ago. Most of the letters exchanged between Don Abel and Don Hugo traveled only the few leagues' between San Gabriel and Los Angeles, and were carried by Indian runners, friends on horseback, or in *carretas* drawn by oxen plodding slowly over bumpy roads, dusty in summer and muddy in winter.

With the passing of the years, the Scotchman became more impregnated with the spirit of *poco tiempo*' than his friend, the "Yankee trader," ever did. Hugo enjoyed the leisurely life of a gentleman rancher and literary dilettante far

more than a competitive business career. As a result, he never made a fortune to compare with Stearns's land empire;⁸ but it is his letters, rather than the busy Don Abel's, that reveal in a witty, intimate way the life they lived. Both men had received a good education—Don Abel in Salem, Massachusetts, and Hugo Reid in Scotch schools and two years at Cambridge University.⁹ They remained freethinking citizens of the world, beyond the day of becoming *paisanos* by settling in Mexican territory and swearing allegiance solely to a Catholic mother country. Always their conversation had remarkable scope, and never was limited for long to local affairs. It would dart from South America to the Sandwich Isles (Hawaii)¹⁰ and back again to Boston, as likely as not, because they were familiar with such far-away places, as captains of their own trading vessels—Don Abel's *American Ranger* and Don Hugo's Mexican schooner, the *Esmeralda*.

John Gaffey tried to give me the proper background for such a study as he had suggested, by devoting most of his Saturdays for a year or so toward my education in early California history. Frequently his own eloquence would carry him away, beyond the bounds of exact dates and documentary evidence, but always he was seeking the "essential truth" and knowledge of the spacious, happy way of living which vanished so suddenly at Midas' touch.

In time I completed a sketch—which only lately I have attempted to amplify—of Hugo Reid's life as derived from his letters: a hundred twenty-one of them written to Abel Stearns; twenty-two others published the year of his death, in the *Los Angeles Star*;¹¹ and miscellaneous Reid items

in the John Gaffey, William Heath Davis, Pío Pico, Antonio Coronel, and Henry Raup Wagner collections of Californiana.²²

Mr. Gaffey seemed pleased with my work, but I felt that affection obscured his critical sense. The original sketch only skirted the essential truth which he had hoped I could reach. The result of my research, accurate as far as it went, had not been illumined by the use of informed imagination, indispensable in the re-creation of an unfamiliar way of life. To be sure, Helen Hunt Jackson and William Heath Davis before me had each felt an interest in this adventurous Scotchman; but neither had given Hugo Reid's character and influence their due.

Davis once paid a two months' visit to Don Hugo and Doña Victoria, the Indian wife, in their most prosperous days when they were living off the fat of the land. They offered gay and unstinting hospitality from their beautiful Rancho de Santa Anita to whoever came that way. This was in 1844, and later Davis collected much written information about the Reids while working on his classic *Seventy-five Years in California*. Most of what he knew he left out of the final draft, retaining hearsay in place of vivid, revealing passages from his own account of the long visit at Santa Anita. Fortunately the full account is preserved among the Davis manuscripts in the Huntington Library.

Mrs. Jackson used the extraordinary Reid family as prototypes for leading characters in *Ramona*, but to our way of thinking—Mr. Gaffey's and mine—the fictional characters hold less interest than the originals. "H. H." saw some of Hugo Reid's own letters and heard the true story of his life

from Don Antonio Coronel, who had been his friend." She knew that Reid left Scotland at the age of eighteen, when his first love jilted him and "forever" embittered him against women; and that the impulsive youth sailed for an unknown destination in the New World. He spent some six years of compassless wandering in South America and Mexico, learning several languages and seeking color, gold, romance, before being drawn north to settle in California. She also knew that there he met and fell in love with a beautiful Indian woman who had four children by an early, Indian marriage. He gave them all his name and lifelong devotion, and became a pillar of society in San Gabriel.

In spite of this information—hers for the asking—in drawing the character of Angus Phail (Ramona's Scotch father), Mrs. Jackson yielded to the popular prejudice that a white man marrying an Indian inevitably became a drunken "squaw man." Many of Hugo Reid's friends had feared just such a sordid outcome of his marriage; but it seems strange that, in the book, Ramona's mother should have remained a nameless squaw, when Doña Victoria herself was recognized by whoever came to know her as a person of consequence. The faithless Ramona Gonzaga, Angus' first love, receded into the shadowy character of a Scotch girl from Cardross who played her part before Hugo was twenty.

From Reid's own letters and the diary of a young dragoon²⁴ now emerges the true story of Doña Victoria's daughter, María Ygnacia, who grew up to have such charm that the *paisanos* called her the "Flower of San Gabriel." It is less passionate, less eventful, than the romance of *Ramona*, but has a delicacy and a pathos quite lost in the novel.²⁵

Ramona's imaginary lover, the long-suffering Alessandro, must yield his place in real life to John McHenry Hollingsworth, a boyish officer of dragoons, who came West with the New York Volunteers at the time of the Mexican War and greatly admired María Ygnacia. Since she died at twenty-one, hers is only a minor rôle in the strictly historical drama, while Hugo and Victoria effectively play the leads.

Occasionally, in order to interpret the meaning of Hugo's own words or to fill a gap in the correspondence, I have supplemented the Reid letters with information drawn from contemporary accounts and reminiscences of a later date. There are three specific passages, in the beginning of the book, where I have attempted to find the essential truth through the use of informed imagination. To the best of my knowledge, no eyewitness account has survived of (1) Hugo Reid's first visit to California in '32 (2) his meeting with Victoria in '34; and (3) his *paisano* wedding in '37. Around the dates given by Don Hugo himself, entries in the San Gabriel Mission records, and contemporary census lists, I reconstructed three probable scenes, with the idea of placing Hugo and Victoria in the surroundings in which they lived and breathed throughout the period of the Reid-Stearns correspondence. Hugo did not commence writing regularly to Don Abel until just after the marriage. Indeed, among the first items in the correspondence are a number of *cartas de orden* informing Don Abel of materials needed from his Los Angeles *tienda* (store) in the construction of the Reids' first home, Uva Espina, in San Gabriel.

John Gaffey was not old enough to have known Hugo Reid, as did Charles Jenkins," "Lalita" Evertson King," and

Don Antonio Coronel, but Reid's letters to Stearns came to "Don Juan" in a direct way. Don Abel's beautiful wife, Doña Arcadia, was only fourteen when she became mistress of El Palacio de Don Abel," the undisputed social center of Los Angeles for a long time after their marriage. She hero-worshiped her big husband, so much older and more experienced than she, and spent many hours in appreciative silence, listening to vital conversations between him and his cronies—such men as her own father, who was Don Abel's contemporary, Hugo Reid, Jacob Leese, Alfred Robinson, the Pico brothers Andrés and Pío, Nathaniel Pryor, Captain John Cooper, William Hartnell, William Heath Davis, José Antonio Carrillo, Captain Sutter, Don José de la Guerra y Noriega, Henry Mellus, Robert Semple, Captain John Wilson, Richard Laughlin, J. J. Warner, "Don Benito" Wilson, John Temple, Henry Fitch, Thomas Larkin, William Leidesdorff, William Wolfskill, Louis Vignes, and others of that informal oligarchy which guided California's destiny through a difficult transition period and laid the foundations for her later, astounding growth.

Some of these men played a part in California politics during each of the three successive decades that covered her transformation from a Spanish missionary colony whose "currency" in trade was Indian shell money" or bullock hides; through a pastoral Mexican interlude when the power of the Church was sharply curtailed; into an American territory known to possess one of the richest deposits of gold in the world. A few *paisanos*, notably Don Abel and Don Hugo, can be remembered most of all for their part in securing full state rights for California in 1850, when all law

and order seemed to have been submerged by the horde of unruly "miners" who participated in the Gold Rush.

After Don Abel's death, his letters and papers went into the keeping of his brother-in-law, Don Arturo Bandini. For years they were stored in an office in the Arcadia Block.²⁰ When Don Arturo also died, Doña Arcadia insisted that her husband's most valuable papers be turned over to John Gaffey. She had been intensely gratified when this delightful, scholarly Irishman married her favorite niece and namesake. They had started family life in a way that pleased her, offering oldtime hospitality from Hacienda la Rambla.

Doña Arcadia outlived most of her contemporaries, not dying until 1912, and John Gaffey, such a great storyteller himself, spent many hours in her company listening tirelessly to tales of life in the Land of *Poco Tiempo*, the vanished land in which she had spent her youth. Three years ago, "Don Juan" followed her in death, and his valuable collection of Californiana, including Hugo Reid's letters to Don Abel, has passed into the keeping of the Huntington Library. This is as it should be, for the library was founded by Mr. Gaffey's lifelong friend, Henry E. Huntington, and it stands on ground once owned by Hugo Reid and his Indian wife.²¹

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