Ella Hepworth Dixon: Storming the Bastille, or Taking it by Stealth?

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If the journalist Ella Hepworth Dixon is mentioned today, her name is usually associated with her New Woman novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman*. This novel, however, only represents a very small proportion of its author's overall output. Not only did Dixon publish other works of fiction, including her less well-known *My Flirtations* and countless short stories, but for over forty years she earned her living by contributing on a regular basis to various periodicals. Moreover, albeit for a very brief spell, Dixon even became that *rara avis* a woman editor herself and on her death in 1932 was considered worthy of an obituary in *The Times*[1]. Journalism, therefore, provided Dixon with a certain amount of fame and fortune, and occasionally material for fiction. A close analysis of her work, both fictional and non-fictional, reveals much about her own attitude to her profession, while at the same time providing deeper insights into the problematics of journalism as a career for women in general at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Story of a Modern Woman was initially published in 1894 to great acclaim, then confined to the *oubliettes* of literary history for decades, only to be re-discovered towards the end of the twentieth century during the first wave of renewed interest in *fin-de-siècle* women writers. Consequently it was republished by Merlin in 1990 in their Radical Fiction series and then by Broadview in 2004.[2] Described by John Sutherland in *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* as "one of the finest New Woman novels"[3], it recounts the intertwined destinies of two young women friends, both "modern" in their individual ways. One, Alison Ives, is an angel out of the house doing good works amongst the poor in the East End of London before her almost inevitable marriage; the other, Mary Erle is orphaned and left to fend not only for herself, but also to take care of her younger brother. "Wish[ing] to make her way in the world and compete with men"[4], she eventually embarks on a career in journalism.

In *Woman* in September 1896 in a series entitled "My Faith and My Work"[5], Dixon speaks of her conception of the novel:

> *The Story of a Modern Woman* (which was written by-the-bye in 1892-3, before the rush of "woman-books" began) was an effort to show how

> unequal is the struggle between the sexes - a struggle which has never been so bitter in the history of the world before - for the things that are most worth having.[6]

Then and now, however, the novel has been read as largely autobiographical, and, of course, even the initials of the two female protagonists, "A.I." and "M.E.", encourage such interpretations. There are also certain undeniable similarities in particular between the apprentice writer and her creator. Like Mary Erle, Dixon (1857-1932) had originally set out to pursue a career in Art, but, on the sudden death of her father in 1879, had had to revise her ambitions and think about ways of earning a living. As the daughter of William Hepworth Dixon, long time editor of *The Athenaum* (1853-1869), Dixon must, again like Mary Erle, have benefited from family connections, especially her father's name, at the start of her career. As one of Mary Erle's editors commented "The name, of course, … the name counts for *something.* Your late father's name carries weight with a *certain* section of the public"[7] (emphasis in original). Nevertheless, when the novel was published in book form by Heinemann some of the most obviously autobiographical details which had appeared in the serialised version in the *Lady's Pictorial* - such as the whole of the original third chapter, entitled "Wonderings", which traces the heroine's education in Germany - were removed. These passages, nevertheless, remained in Cassell's American edition which might suggest that in England where she would have been better known, the author was deliberately trying to draw attention away from her own life, and complicate an autobiographical reading.

Moreover, throughout the story Dixon emphasises the enormous discrepancies between life "as it is" and artistic representations, or *mis*representations, of life. At the Central London School of Art, where early in the novel Mary Erle spends many dreary months, painting from life is considered a "kind of frivolous extra"[8]. Later, when she learns of her lover's betrayal the scene takes place in a fashionable theatre where "the foolish, inane, unreal comedy on stage"[9], "so adorably *untrue to life*" (emphasis added), is in sharp contrast to "the hideous comedy going on in the box"[10] where Vincent Hemming is seated with Miss Higgins, the vulgar yet wealthy woman he will marry in order to further his career. Ironically, too, Mary is told by one

newspaper editor that her realistic novel would not please the British public which "doesn't expect [novels] to be like life" and wants "a thoroughly breezy, healthy tone"[11] with a happy ending. When Mary insists that she "can't help seeing things as they are" and adds "I thought … that the public would take anything – in a newspaper", she is told "Not in fiction"[12]. At the same time the narrative is regularly punctuated by "spesh-shul" editions offering the latest "revolting details" in a celebrity divorce, and Mary even overhears the editor giving instructions to another contributor to touch up photographs of the co-respondents. The truth might be "supremely attractive" to the likes of Mary, but readers are left to draw their own conclusions about the integrity of some editors.

In the "Foreword" to her memoirs, entitled *As I Knew Them: Sketches of People I Have Met Along the Way*, published in 1930, Dixon also relates an incident which should put readers on their guard against drawing hasty conclusions from artistic representations. She tells of a young man being so enamoured of her portrait that he tried to persuade her mother to sell it to him, but he "promptly fled from the house" when she appeared in person, "grubby with oil-paint …, dressed in an unbecoming black jersey"[13]. Dixon claims that the anecdote reveals her capacity for laughing at herself, and indeed humour was perenially important to her, a topic to which I shall return. The story additionally testifies to Dixon's conception of the multi-faceted aspects of an individual, and the unreliability of artistic impressions. *The Story of a Modern Woman* is similarly multi-faceted, both revealing and concealing, and it would be reductive to consider it only in simple autobiographical terms.

In fact the novel contains much more than merely the fictionalised memoirs of a novice in Fleet Street. It paints, for instance, a highly critical picture of the artistic world in London, a subject dear to the author and one which she regularly discoursed upon in both her fiction and non-fiction. Furthermore, through the character of Alison Ives, it encapsulates in many ways Dixon's fundamental belief in "a kind of moral and social trades-unionism among women", as summed up in her interview for W.T. Stead's 1894 overview of "The Novel of the Modern Woman"[14]. Then, most

importantly, through Mary Erle, it reveals Dixon's somewhat ambivalent attitude towards the periodical press which, although it provided her with a livelihood for over four decades, was fraught with difficulties for women who wanted to be taken seriously in the profession.

From the opening pages of the novel the reader is presented with less than flattering images of newspapermen, intruding on private grief for their various publications:

> There was the brisk, smartly-dressed young gentleman who came to do a leader for a daily paper, who had a wandering, observant eye and a leather notebook, and who proceeded to make a number of notes in shorthand, asking innumerable questions as his omnivorous glance travelled rapidly round the study. Another press-man - a small, apologetic man with greyish hair and a timid cough - asked to see the house for the *Evening Planet*. He begged of Elizabeth on the hall steps to tell him if the Professor had said anything – anything particular, which would work up as a leader.[15]

Not long afterwards at a fashionable kettledrum hosted by her friend's mother, Mary Erle meets society journalists Bosanquet-Barry, the new editor of the *Comet*, "pluck(ed) nice and hot from Oxford ... who has none of the old hackneyed Fleet Street ideas", and Beaufort Flower, representatives of "the new idea in journalism"[16], the two of whom, much to her dismay, engage in "whispering malicious things of one's host or hostess behind their backs"[17]. Later still, when Mary ventures into Grub Street itself, depicted as a decidedly unsavoury place for a young woman, she encounters more unpleasant representatives of the fourth estate, primarily interested in gossip about "smart people".

Dixon's career in journalism.

By the time the novel was published, Dixon was in her late thirties and had been earning her living by her pen for several years, so she could speak of journalism from first-hand experience. In her memoirs she writes of her "singularly happy working life"[18], and describes her early years in the profession as trouble-free and light-hearted: "These journalistic activities were mixed up with a great deal of dancing and dining out; white tulle skirts and natty little laced up bodices took the place of an evening of inky fingers"[19]. Readers will recall the very different début assigned to

Mary Erle who spends long, lonely evenings in a gloomy bedsit, experiencing "the horror of waiting, waiting, waiting"[20] for her lover to return. This may be another distancing technique to distinguish the fictional representation from the real-life writer, or represent a deliberate attempt to minimise her own early difficulties, for Dixon's comments elsewhere, such as in the above-mentioned *Woman* article, indicate she experienced a rather more turbulent working atmosphere than her memoirs suggest. As late as 1925 writing in the *Westminster Gazette* on opportunities for women, Dixon maintains, "One of the last citadels to fall was the newspaper office. Here prejudice reigned supreme"[21]. Fortunately, she could conclude, "But today the Bastille of Journalism has fallen", although her choice of metaphors is surely indicative of the "bitter" hostilities which women had to overcome in the profession.

As has been well documented by scholars such as Margaret Beetham, Barbara Onslow and Margaret Stetz, as more and more women took to writing as a career throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century, debates about the role and status of the woman writer increased in intensity and, sometimes, animosity. Dixon herself was painfully aware of such hostility and in one of her early "Pensées de Femme" columns in the *Lady's Pictorial* even claimed "I have always been led to suppose, by a perusal of the so-called humorous papers, that if there was one thing on earth which the average man loathed, it was a female writer"[22]. Whilst it might have been considered acceptable for a lady to produce works of fiction or society articles from the safe confines of her private home, entering the public sphere of newspaper offices was an entirely different matter, and openly deplored. In *The Story of a Modern Woman*, for instance, Mary Erle tells her doctor, "Aunt Julia ... thinks I am given over to the Evil One since I've become a journalist"[23]. In her memoirs Dixon herself admits that in the "gay nineties" when she "spent a winter Season in New York", she "was *prudent enough* to conceal the fact that [she] had ever written for any journal. A 'newspaper woman', over there, had no social standing whatever"[24] (emphasis added). Within a few years, however, the situation must have changed, for in 1900 Dixon signed at least one article in the *New York Independent*[25].

Significantly, it was Americans such as Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Banks who became notorious for engaging in spectacular sensational journalism in the 1880s and 1890s and cited as examples not to be imitated. The woman journalist, therefore, found herself in an uncomfortable hinterland, unwelcome in the public domain and somewhat ostracised in the private sphere.

As if to refute the "[u]ngallant suspicions ... so frequently cast upon the social and domestic capacities of the writing-woman"[26], many of the articles about women in journalism were accompanied by attractive photographs and flattering verbal images of their so-called womanly skills away from their desks. For instance, in the *Lady's Pictorial* series on "Lady Journalists", which began in November 1893, whether describing Mrs Crawford, Miss Emily Faithful, Mrs Roy Devereux, Mrs Meynell or Ella Hepworth Dixon, much emphasis is placed on their "womanliness", their "unvarying kindness and courtesy", "their unimpeachable taste" and their overall refinement. Dixon similarly took care to emphasise the femininity of her fictional women writers. In "A Scribbler's Comedy", for example, a short story published in *Pall Mall Magazine* in 1895, Dixon creates such a "radiant vision" in the character of "John Bathurst", the *nom de plume* of an older, much more glamorous Mary Erle, who gets the better of her editor, largely because he is so charmed by her appearance. "He objected, in the first place, to the presence of women in newspaper offices"[27], but she is so unlike his usual impression "of lady journalists in *pince-nez* and women in waterproofs", she "seemed to illuminate the dingy newspaper office".

Interestingly, this is the story which Dixon altered most when it was republished in her 1904 collection of short stories, revealing changes perhaps in her own interests as well as those of her reading public. In the original, "John Bathurst" wrote a collection of short stories entitled "Yearnings", "a study in modern femininity", dealing with the "New Revolt", possibly reminiscent of notorious New Woman writer George Egerton and her *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894) which had caused such a sensation when they openly confronted traditional ideas about women, especially their sexual and emotion desires. "John Bathurst"'s editor, who "hated these squealing women",

ultimately offers her a column on the Woman Question, so much in vogue in the 1890s. In the re-published version the protagonist writes not fictional texts, but political essays on Free Trade and in the end her motivations are discovered to be the forwarding of the political career of her husband, a contingency the "unimaginative" editor had never considered. The New Woman phenomenon had been extremely shortlived and by 1904 more women were campaigning for practical political advantages. Never a militant herself, Dixon prided herself on being able to gauge and adjust to prevalent trends which would interest her readers. As she remarked in one of her "Pensées de Femme"

> Irate masculine critics have sometimes accused me of cultivating too high a standard for my sex. ... It is a real pleasure for me to gossip, week by week, to women in *Lady's Pictorial*. Every now and again I get an agreeable note, I hear an appreciative phrase, which tell me I am in touch with many of my readers. It is a privilege, indeed, not to be lightly regarded, that of being able to catch the ear, to put, as it were, one's finger on the pulse of so large a feminine public. In all that makes for progress, for sanity, for purity, for health, I am with them heart and soul.[28]

Dixon and her editors

In the *Westminster Gazette* article mentioning the "Bastille" of journalism, Dixon openly criticizes some of the earlier prejudices of editors, in particular the limitations they imposed on women:

> Hardly one was broad-minded enough to "give woman her head" in their columns. The famous exceptions of Mrs Crawford, the Paris correspondent, and of Flora Shaw and "The Thunderer" only proved the rule.
>
> Women (unless it was fiction) must only write in the "Woman's Page" and not intrude into the more serious and sacred parts of the paper. A female person might be the greatest actress of her time, or even a successful dramatist, but never, by any chance, could she be entrusted to criticise a play. As to affairs, foreign or domestic, who wanted her opinion? Pictures? She might paint them, but she must not aspire to point out their qualities or defects.[29]

Dixon nevertheless concedes that editors were "often delightful persons, full of a sly humour"[30], and in her memoirs she gives the impression that she, rather like "John Bathurst", came into little direct conflict with them. December 26, 1896), p. 966.

She begins the chapter entitled "Some Editors"

> Having been an editor myself, I understand the trials, the unutterable boredom, the delerious excitement, the difficulty of "suffering fools glady", the delight of pouncing on the right man or woman for one's purpose, which make up the excitement of such a personage.[31]

Unfortunately, so far no accounts have come to light of her shortlived period in the "editorial arm-chair"[32], as she calls it in the above-mentioned *Woman* article on "My Faith and My Work", nor is there evidence of her working for a woman editor, although she claims in her memoirs "A woman editor, like a woman doctor, is usually more stiff and uncompromising."[33] Her accounts of her dealings with men editors, however, suggest a trouble-free existence. She describes, for instance, being approached by several eminent editors such as the first Lord Burnham:

> One day I received a little letter from him saying he had read everything which I had written, and asking me to contribute regularly to the *Daily Telegraph*. The result was a number of travel articles, which were more popular in the late Victorian era than now.[34]

Dixon also devotes an entire chapter to Lord Northcliffe, and describes how Sir Alfred Harmsworth sent for her when he envisaged setting up the *Daily Mirror* initially intended as a daily paper for women. In the same section she relates "a thrilling moment" at a dinner party given by William Heinemann when her host called out, "Have you heard that Alfred Harmsworth is buttonholing everybody he sees to say you are the only journalist who knows how to write?"[35] Moreover, it would seem that she herself was not restricted to the 'Woman's Page". For example, she writes

> From early on, I had the good fortune to be a constant contributor to the *Daily Mail*, where I did articles on general subjects for the middle page. As long as Mr. Thomas Marlowe was in the editorial chair, I had only to "ring up", suggest a subject and it was taken.[36]

Are these anecdotes again a case of a selective memory, or more evidence of Dixon's ingenuity in manoeuvring her way diplomatically around Fleet Street? Her overall conclusion in 1930 is "Who, indeed, can say that Fleet Street is unfriendly?"[37], but, as the slightly earlier *Westminster Gazette* article revealed, friendliness did not necessarily signify respect or equality, and in the 1890s there was rather more antagonism than Dixon cared to recall in her memoirs.

One of the most famous contemporary contributions to the debate about women's place in the *fin-de-siècle* newspaper office was Arnold Bennett's *Journalism for Women*, subtitled *A Practical Guide*, published in 1898. Ever-ready to defend her sex, Dixon understandably took umbrage at some of Arnold Bennett's comments. In chapter II, for instance, he declares

> In Fleet Street, there are not two sexes, but two species – journalists and women-journalists ... . And we treat these two species differently. They are not expected to suffer the same discipline, nor are they judged by the same standards. In Fleet Street femininity is an absolution, not an accident. [38]

In one of her more serious "Pensées de Femme" columns, Dixon retorts

> It is humiliating for the sex to be told at a public dinner, and by no less an authority than the literary critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, not only that we cannot spell, but that we cannot punctuate our sentences. Then, to make matters worse, the editor of a woman's penny paper has written a little book to tell us how to succeed in journalism - a book in which he duly notes the woman-journalist's unbusiness-like habits, her irresponsibility, and - her tendency to devastating headaches![39]

The literary critic to whom she refers might well be W.L. Courtney and "the editor of a woman's penny paper" must be Arnold Bennett who edited *Woman* and whose *Guide* had been published earlier that year. Dixon then goes on to enumerate various highly successful women journalists such as Mrs Beer, Miss Flora Shaw, Mrs Crawford and Mrs Meynell, to discredit the idea that "any one can seriously contend that women have failed in journalism"[40].

It could be argued in his defence that Arnold Bennett was primarily trying to discourage amateurism and promote a more disciplined, business-like attitude in women writers which would ideally remove any sexual discrimination within the profession, a worthy aim which Dixon would surely have condoned. Furthermore, it should be remembered that in the Victorian literary world in general journalism was often regarded, even for men, as somewhat suspect. For instance, in J. M. Barrie's *When a Man's Single*, singled out by Arnold Bennett as a "brilliant novel [which] should be studied by every young journalist"[41], a short exchange between the hero's beloved and her mother is revelatory:

> "... he is evidently to be a newspaper man all his life."
> "I wish you would say journalist, mamma, ... or literary man. The profession of letters is a noble one."
> "Perhaps it is, ... but I can't think it is very respectable."[42]

In the *Guide*, on the other hand, Arnold Bennett regularly refers to the "*art* of journalism" (emphasis added), and his concluding sentences precisely accentuate his desire for greater respect for the profession from those on the inside as well as the outside:

> A vast number of women engaged in journalism, I verily believe regard it as a delightful game. The tremendous seriousness of it they completely miss. … Therefore, my final words to the outside contributor ... are these: Journalism is not a game, and in journalism there are no excuses.[43]

This sentiment is highly reminiscent of two earlier articles on Journalism published in *Woman* in a series entitled "What Women May Do" signed "The Editor", in which the author insists:

> From the first let me say I am not going to encourage every girl and woman who occasionally pens an essay or a short story, with or without the satisfaction of seeing it in print, in the belief that she is a journalist. I have not space to deal with amateur journalism, out of which a large number of women make a very small number of pounds per annum, and from which they appear to have no ambition to soar into the higher flights of the profession.[44]

Dixon in fact worked with Arnold Bennett for several years whilst he was editor of *Woman* and received nothing but glowing praise in the pages of his magazine. For example, in December 1894 her "two first books" are described as "among the most successful publications of the past few years"[45] and the article concludes

> Miss Hepworth Dixon is much sought after by editors because she writes carefully, punctually, and honestly, never "scamping", and having only one quality of work; and her clear bold handwriting is a thing of joy to printers.[46]

Dixon was clearly not one of the unprofessional women Arnold Bennett was targetting. In her memoirs she describes him as "a gay and kindly editor"[47], so there can have been no lasting enmity between the two.

Both inside and outside the literary industry, however, heated arguments continued to abound on what was appropriate for women in what remained largely a male-

dominated profession. The literary world seemed to be trying to maintain clearly defined separate spheres according to gender. These efforts were especially intense during the heyday of the New Woman, when some women writers such as Sarah Grand and Mona Caird dared to write on subjects which society deemed unsuitable for their sex. In an early chapter in her memoirs, Dixon relates another occasion on which she preferred to hide her identity. Describing her own professional début, she informs readers, "One of the first newspapers I wrote for was *The World*. Mr. Edmund Yates, undismayed by my youth and inexperience, printed countless short stories of mine and various articles of travel".[48] She continues: "A series of short stories was running in the paper called 'Town and Country Tales'. They had to be what nurses used to call 'owdacious'. Mine were terribly 'knowing'."[49] Most of these were anonymous or signed merely with initials, as was customary in journals at that time. Dixon then relates dancing with a young man who, by way of polite conversation, asks if she has read the latest "Town and Country Tale", and immediately corrects himself, not knowing that she herself had actually written "the obnoxious story", saying, "I don't think it's quite the kind of story you ought to read."[50] Dixon's reaction is revelatory: "For a moment I hesitated, and then, being a young person of discretion, I remained silent. Why spoil my evening?"[51]

On one level this could be interpreted as the typical silencing of the female voice. Dixon's final comment, however, hints rather at a skilful capacity for making the most of a difficult situation and, ultimately, serving her own ends. For, indeed, what was to be gained from speaking out? Self-presevation was surely of primary importance. It was certainly a strategy which Dixon employed regularly and is arguably symptomatic of her entire professional life, revealing her astute ability to circumvent the minefields of prejudice surrounding women, especially writing women. Towards the end of her career, in another of her *Westminster Gazette* articles Dixon herself admitted "with humiliation that I have never 'burned for my faith' at all" and added, "which is a shameful thing"[52]. This might attract scorn from more engaged activists, but at the same time it could help to explain why, in spite of much continued hostility towards literary women, she managed to remain permanently in

work, became a selling point for journals herself, and, as mentioned earlier, was even engaged as editor of a woman's magazine. Moreover, she always showed tremendous respect for those who were politically engaged, while castigating those who actively campaigned against voting rights for women. For example in one of her *Lady's Pictorial* columns she writes

> Because excellent Mrs Blank, seated placidly in her mansion at Streatham, with a panting motor at the door waiting to convey her to an Anti-Suffrage meeting, has no political ambitions, it is, I take it, at least unfair that she should in any way try to prevent her more public-spirited sisters from attaining the object for which they have made so many and such heroic sacrifices[53]

My Flirtations and the uses of anonymity

Anonymity could clearly have advantages. Dixon's *My Flirtations* first appeared anonymously in the *Lady's Pictorial* from January to April, 1892, before being published in book form by Chatto and Windus under the pesudonym of "Margaret Wynman", a pen-name Dixon then used on several other occasions. In her memoirs Dixon writes that she never owned to the authorship of *My Flirtations*, although when *The Story of a Modern Woman* began in serial form in the *Lady's Pictorial* it was signed "Ella Hepworth Dixon, ('Margaret Wynman', Author of 'My Flirtations')"[54] Moreover, in the above-mentioned article on "My Faith and My Work" published in *Woman* in September 1896 Dixon had already "lifted the black gauze veil of Anonymity"[55]. In the article she describes herself as "a woman with a literary burden on her conscience", and alleges embarrassment at "so frivolous a book". At the same time she also raises an issue which several other women writers such as Alice Meynell would tackle more forcefully: authors, especially women, rarely had any control over the actual packaging and promoting of a literary work.

> This booklet bore the egregious title ... of *My Flirtations*, and had clothed itself, unbeknown to the author, in a cover of violent pink, on which some person who will be for ever hateful to me had designed, with considerable archness, a silver fan. Oh, that title; oh, that cover; oh, that silver fan! What have I not suffered from the very thoughts of you?[56]

It is difficult to gauge the exact veracity of Dixon's claims, and modern readers may even find the original cover rather charming. Nevertheless, when *My Flirtations* appeared in the American edition the cover had become green with a simple gold

embossed design, suggesting perhaps that her complaints were real and had been addressed.

In spite of Dixon's reservations about its appearance, the work was nonetheless well-received: "This tiny collection of lampoons enjoyed its chief vogue among heads of colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, among judges in the High Courts, and other folk of a sedate turn in England and America."[57] In addition, "Much to the surprise of the author, the journals which she most dreaded, the *Saturday Review*, the *Speaker*, *Spectator, Athenaeum*, and the like, were friendly in their criticisms" (*ibid.*). Her conclusion is "Such, it will be seen, are the advantages of *frivolous* anonymity"[58] (emphasis added). Dixon may be implying that had they known the identity of the author of the "booklet", as she calls it, such readers would not have been so enthusiastic. The critic in the *Lady's Pictorial*, in fact, suggests an almost wilful desire to confuse or arouse curiosity:

> It is not for me to say whether the owner of the clever pen, and the observant eyes, is not already known to the world under another name. In fact, I have my own strong suspicions as to the sex of the writer, and I should not be at all surprised to learn that the pseudonym hides the identity of a well-known literary man. The secret, of course, remains hidden in the breast of the Editor, but I feel sure that my opinion is not without foundation[59]

However mysterious the authorial identity, the work was certainly enthusiastically reviewed. Barbara in *Woman*'s "Book Chat", for example, begins, "A prettily bound and exceptionally clever and amusing little series of sketches is *My Flirtations* … "[60] and adds, "This little volume … is much better worth reading than many more pretentious volumes." Robert Ross in *The Saturday Review* declares:

> The older humour is not dead after all - at least the announcement was premature - and the lady who writes under the name of Margaret Wynman has vindicated her sex from the old charge of having no appreciation of humour, old or new. *My Flirtations* is one of the most amusing books we have come across for a long time.[61]

Even the critic in *Punch*, famed for its satirical and often highly misogynistic comments, claims, "It is a literary portfolio of lively sketches of men and women, 'their tricks and their manners', all most amusing and told in a naturally easy and epigrammatic style."[62]

In her memoirs Dixon asserts of *My Flirtations*, "As it had a foolish title (suggested for publishing reasons) I never owned to its authorship ..."[63] Letters exchanged between the author and the publishers, however, reveal no mention at all of any desire to change the title. On the other hand, they continually express concern about "what name is to be given on the title page". A day after offering Dixon thirty-five pounds for the reproduction of her "social sketches entitled *My Flirtations*", Andrew Chatto (who, rather like Mary Erle's editors, notoriously liked a name) wrote to Dixon's sister, Marion, on the subject:

> I had not noticed that "My Flirtations" were published anonymously, and was under the impression that your sister would put her own name to a publication of the sketches in book form. I would always advise authors to secure to their own names any popularity that may attract to a success, by always publishing in their own names - most pseudonyms are open secrets. - But this is not a point I would press in opposition to your sister's wishes, if on consideration she decides to adopt some other pen name.[64]

Chatto and Windus' desire for Dixon to use her own name might also indicate that Dixon's name had acquired a certain value in its own right since her famous father had by then been dead for well over ten years. Although her contributions to Edmund Yates' *The World* remained largely anonymous, Dixon's signature had already appeared in full in the *Sunday Times* as early as January 1888 for a short story entitled "Dr Patmore's Patient". After that she had contributed several signed "Chats with Celebrities" to the same paper. Simultaneously, she had worked with Oscar Wilde when he took over the editorship of *The Woman's World*, apparently receiving "the unstinted praise which is so rare in Editors"[65] from Wilde himself for a signed story entitled "Murder - or Mercy?" which contains some embryonic elements she would later rework into *The Story of a Modern Woman*. She had also attracted the notice of the anonymous reviewer in the *St. James's Gazette* who noted her appeal to readers of both sexes:

> Mr Oscar Wilde and his enchanting fashion plates combine to make *The Woman's World* attractive; and there is much in the magazine which, primarily intended for feminine delectation, is of quite equal importance to such persons as husbands and brothers. Of such are Miss Hepworth Dixon's paper about "Women on Horseback" and Miss Evelyne Moore's brightly written article about Angelica Kaufmann.[66]

And slightly later, Dixon's name was again mentioned in the "Review of August Magazines":

> *The Woman's World* is a capital magazine for a married man to buy. He tells his wife he got it entirely for her sake; but he may always find some very good reading for himself … . Miss Ella Hepworth Dixon gives a very learned and amusing, plentifully illustrated article on 'Cloaks in Europe' (sic) from the days of Frédégonde, the wife of Chilpéric, down to the time when our mothers were young.[67]

By her own account Dixon also "contributed a few 'interviews at home' of some personal friends [until] Wilde decided, very wisely, to end the series. 'People,' he wrote, 'are beginning to tire of the silver ink-pots, the Persian rug, the brass paper-weight, the palms in pots ... "'.[68] Dixon recognizes, "He was right. Made attractive at first by Edmund Yates in *The World*, this kind of journalism had become passably absurd.'[69] Despite Dixon's disclaimers, this is precisely what many other women journalists were still writing and what Mary Erle's editor asks her to do in *The Story of a Modern Woman*. At the end of the same year, a short story, "A Winter Idyl", signed in Dixon's own name, appeared in *The Lady's Pictorial Christmas Number*, and thus began a long collaboration with that magazine, which only ended in March 1921 when it amalgamated with *Eve.*

Within three years Dixon's name had definitely become famous enough to be considered worth mentioning in advertisements. For example, the announcement for *The Special Winter Number of "Woman"* of 1891 declared, "Every Story, Article, and Illustration will be the work of a Woman" and specifically drew attention to "A short story by Ella Hepworth Dixon", the only other named author being Mrs Edward Kennard. After the success of *My Flirtations*, *The Special Holiday Number of "Woman"* in 1893 again used Dixon's pen-name in its advertisement as one of its "special features": "'a ROMANTIC STORY by MARGARET WYNMAN, Author of 'MY FLIRTATIONS"'. It is interesting to note that in a much later exchange of letters between Dixon and Grant Richards in1904 before the publication of her collection of short stories, entitled *One Doubtful Hour and Other Sidelights on the*

Feminine Temperament, the publisher expresses reservations about the financial success of a collection of short stories "*even with your name*"[70] (emphasis added).

Why, therefore, would Dixon hesitate to put her name to *My Flirtations*? Perhaps because the sketches skated rather too close to recognisable figures. As the title and her chosen pseudonym suggest, *My Flirtations* ostensibly recounts the narrator's "adventures in the labyrinth of love", to quote from *The Sketch* review, and "in the form of thirteen masterly little sketches, or skits" details "her impressions of latter-day Lotharios", to use Robert Ross's words in *The Saturday Review*. It compiled a series of twelve individual sketches originally published in the *Lady's Pictorial* with one new addition, according to *The Sketch* critic "the most daringly thin disguise of an actual personality". Similar comments by other critics indicate that much fun must have been had by contemporaries trying to identify if not the author at least the author's real-life models for the sketches, including (it was postulated) Oscar Wilde and Richard Le Gallienne. "Readers who are 'in the know'- which is nineteenth century for that tame and simple expression 'behind the scenes' will recognise some of the portraits which Margaret Wynman has described with such *merciless fidelity*" (emphasis added), observes "Blue Stocking" in the *Lady's Pictorial*, an opinion shared by the *Punch* critic:

> Some of the characters are evidently intended for portraits, which anyone living in the London world could easily label – (which by changing "a" into "I" would be the probable consequence) – were he not baffled by the art of the skilful writer, and by the equally skilful illustrator – our Mr. Partridge ...[71]

This may explain in part the real reason for Dixon's wish to remain anonymous. *My Flirtations* is certainly an amusing comedy of manners, but under the surface gaiety Dixon offers a perceptive satire of people and institutions. For instance, Peggy Wynman's father is introduced as a Royal Academician and they "live in a nest of artists"[72] which allows the author to highlight the shams and snobberies in the English Art world. Lacking in filial loyalty, Peggy remarks that her father "paints shocking bad portraits, but the British Public is quite unaware of the fact"[73]. Moreover, it appears to be the father's celebrity, as would later be the case for Mary Erle in a

professional capacity, which attracts some of the suitors more than the daughter's charms.

Very little escapes Dixon's sharp eye for significant detail, and by means of a pithy phrase or two, she reveals a great deal about her contemporaries, treating traditionally sacrosanct icons including the home, the family, and marriage with much cynicism. The *Punch* critic even posits that "the one mistake ... the authoress has made is that of getting herself engaged in the last story", and hopes she will rather "be 'engaged' on another volume. She can be married at the end of volume three, and may give us her experiences as the wife of Mr. Whoever-it-may-be."[74]

As well as entertaining readers, therefore, Dixon can be seen to be participating in contemporary debates such as the marriage question, a topic to which she would return, most especially in "Why Women are Ceasing to Marry", an essay published in *The Humanitarian* in June 1899. Whilst some New Woman writers such as Mona Caird vituperated against marriage, Dixon employed more subtle means to raise important questions about the institution. Echoing sentiments expressed in *The Story of a Modern Woman* where Alison Ives claimed a sense of humour is "what women ought to cultivate above all other things"[75], in *The Humanitarian* article Dixon advocates

> The reason why women are ceasing to marry must rather be attributed to a shifting feminine point of view, to a more critical attitude towards their masculine contemporaries. If, of late, they would seem to have shown a disposition to avoid the joys, cares, and responsibilities of the linen cupbaord, it is chiefly, I think, because *their sense of humour is often as keen as it was once supposed to be blunted* (emphasis added).[76]

Dixon even provocatively maintains "the modern spinster's lot, in many respects, [is] an eminently attractive one."[77] Her own unmarried state might naturally have made her more indulgent of spinsterhood, whilst her professional accomplishments proved to the outside world that marriage might no longer be the only means by which a woman could lead a fulfilling life.

Elsewhere Dixon demonstrated that humour could be employed to confound similar contemporary anxieties about the fairer sex. For example, when apparently scientific

discoveries such as Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1882-1902), Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1895) and Cesare Lombroso's *The Female Offender* (1895) seemingly provided reliable evidence for the public's anxieties about the New Woman, so often associated with decadence and degeneration, Dixon's ironical comments in her weekly column in the *Lady's Pictorial* are indicative of her capacity to refute such claims without attracting venomous attacks in return:

> I have lately risen from the perusal of Lombroso's pseudo-scientific work, "The Female Offender", with the pleasing conviction that I contained in my own person all the physical and mental peculiarities of the born female criminal. I forget now whether I possessed more especially the characteristics of an epileptic murderess or merely those of an hysterical and cataleptic pickpocket ... .[78]

Even the serious business, still largely unsolved, of the wage-earning woman, a subject which must have been dear to her own heart - and purse, Dixon manages to discuss with a certain flippancy: "I have it on no less an authority than that of Mr George Meredith that men will never have any real respect for women until those women can and do earn as much money as a man. To have money is beside the question."[79] She concludes, "So adieu to a life of luxurious ease, matrons and maids of the twentieth century; gird your loins for the battle and thank heaven when ... you can earn enough to support a husband in the luxury in which he has been brought up!"[80]

Humour would certainly seem to be one of the dominant features of Dixon's literary output, and yet, on rare occasions, even she would find it difficult to look on the funny side. After the success of *The Story of a Modern Woman*, which in her memoirs she herself described as "a somewhat gloomy study of the struggles of a girl alone in the world and earning her own living"[81], Dixon concentrated most of her energies on her periodical contributions, never attempting to write another novel, restricting herself to the occasional short story and only once, in 1908, venturing into the world of drama with a one-act play entitled *The Toyshop of the Heart*, performed at The Playhouse, but never published.

For the play Dixon drew on elements from earlier short stories, especially from "The Kidnapping of Phil Altamore", "One Doubtful Hour" and "The World's Slow Stain", at times using almost identical dialogue from the latter. Each story accentuates what in the *Woman* article on "My Faith and My Work" Dixon referred to as the "unequal ... struggle between the sexes". At one point in "The World's Slow Stain" the female protagonist, Adela Buller, claims:

> I was a good girl, with deep feelings, and ideals, and all that sort of thing. ... I - I imagined that men were ... good, you know, and that the women who were treated unfairly were the exceptions, and that it was their own fault, generally, if they were. I did not know that women were stuffed with idiotic theories from their very childhood, and that all my life I should suffer, suffer, suffer, for what I had been taught then. We are not told ... what life is, what it all means, or how to play the game. We are like children to whom a pack of cards is thrown, and who are set down to play a strange game with men who are confirmed gamblers. The rules are never told us, so that we blunder helplessly along, and unless we cheat outrageously, or mark the cards, there's small chance of our winning.[82]

She then adds, "And what's so funny, is that most 'good' men like us to be like that, ignorant, silly, helpless - even cheats. They think it pretty." In the play, Dixon's character, now called Rose Rosalba, repeats the tirade practically word for word, and then, lest one should think she limits her criticism to men only, engages in a diatribe against other women who lack a sense of feminine solidarity, so much favoured by Alison Ives:

> I wonder if a woman like your mother could realize ... the difficulties, the temptations of a career like mine. ... O, the women of her class are very hard! ... What do they know of life - your "guarded women" of England? ... Everything has been smoothed, oiled, made easy for the guarded women who judge *us*, and who fight for their men like tigresses if one of them strays our way (her emphasis).[83]

When one considers that the play was part of a charity matinée where the audience must principally have consisted of such middle-class women, it is perhaps not so surprising that, in spite of the favourable reviews, it was not performed again. Nor would Dixon attempt to write again for the theatre although, apparently, there had been plans for a joint venture with H.G. Wells. Apart from her memoirs written over two decades later, Dixon concentrated her efforts on what she was so obviously best

at – writing for the pages of periodicals, where she could engage much more directly and spontaneously with contemporary issues.

After her death in 1932, Dixon's obituary in *The Times* described her as being "born to journalism". One is tempted to add "and dying in it", since she was still contributing articles on a wide range of topics to magazines until the last year of her life. Journalism thus provided Dixon with interesting, purposeful, enjoyable work, which enabled her to promote, in theory and in practice, the cause of other women and to remain an independent bachelor woman herself, as well as being a source of valuable background material for some of her fiction. Her long career reflects many significant changes taking place for both men and women in the publishing world, including a preference for shorter articles and titbits so well-suited to her pen. At the same time Dixon seems to emulate the motto for *Woman*: "Forward, but not too fast". Whilst she constantly defended other women and tried to put into practice Alison Ives' beliefs in women helping other women, there were limitations to the inroads made. By her own example, however, writing for periodicals of various kinds throughout her life as well as editing a woman's magazine, and even turning her name into a selling-point for journals, Dixon made important contributions to the development of the profession of journalism for women. Whilst she cannot be said to have stormed the Bastille, she certainly entered it by stealth and made a more comfortable place for herself and for the women who followed her.

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[1] *The Times* (January 13, 1932), 14.
[2] For the purposes of this essay, I shall generally refer to the more readily available Broadview edition, unless otherwise stated.
[3] John Sutherland, *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* (Harlow: Longman, 1988), 606.
[4] *The Story of a Modern Woman*, 98.
[5] Dixon was fifth in the series after "Roy Devereux", Mrs Andrew Dean, Alicia Ramsay and Mrs Meynell.
[6] *Woman* (September 23, 1896), 8.
[7] *The Story of a Modern Woman*, 108.
[8] *Ibid.*, 85.
[9] *Ibid.*, 142.
[10] *Ibid.*, 140.

[11] *Ibid.*, 182.
[12] *Ibid.*, 147.
[13] *As I Knew Them* (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1930), 7.
[14] W. T. Stead, "The Novel of the Modern Woman", 71.
[15] *The Story of a Modern Woman*, 44.
[16] *Ibid.*, 93.
[17] *Ibid.*, 95.
[18] *As I Knew Them*, 7.
[19] *Ibid.*, 31.
[20] *The Story of a Modern Woman*, 121.
[21] "The Modern Way: A Social Causerie", *Westminster Gazette* (January14, 1925), 6.
[22] "Pensées de Femme", *Lady's Pictorial* (July 4, 1896), 33.
[23] *The Story of a Modern Woman*, 144.
[24] *As I Knew Them*, 100.
[25] "London in Khaki", *New York Independent* (July 26, 1900), 1794-1796.
[26] "Pensées de Femme", *Lady's Pictorial* (July 4, 1896), 33.
[27] "A Scribbler's Comedy", *Pall Mall Magazine* (1895), 286.
[28] "Pensées de Femme", *Lady's Pictorial* (December 26, 1896), 966.
[29] "The Modern Way: A Social Causerie", *Westminster Gazette* (January14, 1925), 6.
[30] *Ibid.*
[31] *As I Knew Them*, 161.
[32] It is often thought that Dixon remained editor of *The Englishwoman* from its début in March 1895 until its demise in 1900. In "My Faith and My Work" she typically makes light of the brevity of her editorial experience: "Owing to circumstances over which I had no control, in half a year *The Englishwoman* had changed publishers; and nowadays ...my wastepaper basket at least contains only such MSS. of my own as I find necesaary to reject myself." "My Faith and My Work", *Woman* (September 23, 1896), 8.
[33] *As I Knew Them*, 161.
[34] *Ibid*., *163*.
[35] *Ibid*.
[36] *Ibid*., 141.
[37] *Ibid.*, 163.
[38] Arnold Bennett, *Journalism for Women*, 10.
[39] "Pensées de Femme", *Lady's Pictorial* (April 9, 1898), 520.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] Bennett, *Journalism for Women*, 48, footnote.
[42] J. M. Barrie, *When a Man's Single* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), 188.
[43] Bennett, *Journalism for Women*, 98.
[44] "What Women May Do", *Woman* (March 23, 1892), 3.
[45] *Woman* (December 5, 1894), 5.
[46] *Ibid.*
[47] *As I Knew Them*, 178.
[48] *Ibid.*, 31.
[49] *Ibid*.

[50] *Ibid.* One is here reminded of the earlier case of Rhoda Broughton's father famously forbidding her from reading her own *Cometh up as a Flower* (1867).
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] "Modern Way: A Social Causerie", *Westminster Gazette* (June 30, 1926), 8.
[53] "Pensées de Femme", *Lady's Pictorial* (April 10, 1909), 566.
[54] *Lady's Pictorial* (January 6, 1894), 6.
[55] "My Faith and My Work", *Woman* (September 1896), 8.
[56] *Ibid.*
[57] *Ibid*.
[58] *Ibid*.
[59] "Blue Stocking" (Miss Curtis), *Lady's Pictorial* (October 15, 1892), 583.
[60] Barbara, "Book Chat", *Woman* (November 30, 1892), 12.
[61] Robert Ross, *The Saturday Review* (October 8, 1892), 419.
[62] *Punch*, (January 21, 1893), 12.
[63] *Ibid.*
[64] Letter dated 28th April, Chatto and Windus archives, Reading.
[65] *As I Knew Them*, 35.
[66] "Review of March Magazines", *St. James's Gazette* (March 1, 1889), 7.
[67] "Review of August Magazines", *St. James's Gazette* (July 29, 1889), 6.
[68] *As I Knew Them*, 35.
[69] *Ibid.*
[70] Letter dated January 18, 1904, Grant Richards Correspondence, Urbana.
[71] *Punch* (January 21, 1893), 12.
[72] *My Flirtations*, 3.
[73] *Ibid.*, 2.
[74] *Punch* (January 21, 1893), 12.
[75] *The Story of a Modern Woman*, 74.
[76] "Why Women are Ceasing to Marry", *The Humanitarian* (June 1899), 391.
[77] *Ibid.*, 394.
[78] "Pensées de Femme", *Lady's Pictorial* (July 13, 1895), 49.
[79] "Pensées de Femme", *Lady's Pictorial* (June 29, 1895), 969.
[80] *Ibid.*
[81] *As I Knew Them*, 136.
[82] "The World's Slow Stain", *Christmas Number of the World* (November 21, 1895), 59.
[83] *The Toyshop of the Heart*, 20-21.

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