“Ceci n’est pas une critique” might well be the leitmotiv of Ella and Marion Hepworth Dixon’s representations of their contemporary art world. It was a world which, thanks to their upbringing and artistic training, they knew from both sides of the canvas. It was not, however, a world easily accessible to women. As late as 1921 Ella Hepworth Dixon wrote, “In Art, as in Literature, it is only during the last few years that women have become completely emancipated…. For fifty years men have been assiduous in assuring women that they had no creative talent, and that no woman would ever achieve a masterpiece.” With uncharacteristic solemnity, she concludes, “It was a depressing period.” (Lady’s Pictorial. January 29, 1921, p.140). Ella (1857-1932) and Marion (1856-1936) were the younger daughters of William Hepworth Dixon (1821–1879), for many years the renowned, or notorious, editor of The Atheneaum, then the leading literary journal. Such a “literary lion” was naturally in contact with the most eminent members of the higher echelons of London society and, to quote from the Sunday Times’ review of [...]
If the name "Hepworth Dixon" has any resonance today, it is largely associated with the literary world. Some readers today are acquainted with Ella Hepworth Dixon's wonderful 1894 novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman;*, and some scholars also may know that, in the 1890s, both Ella and her elder sister Marion contributed short stories to the celebrated *Yellow Book*. Before that, their father, William Hepworth Dixon (1821–1879), had been for many years the renowned, or notorious, editor of the *Athenaeum*, then the leading literary journal. Such a "literary lion" was naturally in contact with the most eminent members of the higher echelons of London society and, to quote the review in the *Sunday Times* of his youngest daughter's memoirs, "celebrities of all kinds used to go to their house in Regent's Park."

Ella (1857–1932) and Marion (1856–1936) Hepworth Dixon, therefore, grew up "in the most brilliant and intellectual society in London," surrounded by artists, sometimes even serving as models. What is less well known is that they both initially set out to become artists themselves, before turning to writing to earn their livings. In this essay, I would like to explore the ways in which, to quote Ella Hepworth Dixon's own words, she and her sister were able, like Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, "to make [their] way in the world and compete with men." Through their example, we can understand better what Michael Field, too, encountered, and thus the social circumstances behind some of the career choices that Bradley and Cooper made.

In careers which spanned more than four decades, the Hepworth Dixon sisters—much like their well-connected contemporaries, Bradley and Cooper—met and worked with most of the luminaries of their day. These included Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Aubrey Beardsley, Sarah Bernhardt, Cicely Hamilton, and Elizabeth Robins; media magnates such as Alfred Harmsworth, later Viscount Northcliffe; and publishers such as William Heinemann and John Lane. The sisters became alternately journalists, reviewers of art, literature, and music, and essayists and short story
writers. Ella also published two novels and became that *rara avis*, the editor of a woman's magazine, before turning dramatist and autobiographer.

Such multiplicity of output was not then uncommon, as we see with the example of Michael Field. Many eminent men and women of letters, better known today for one aspect of their writing, often engaged in a wide variety of literary enterprises. What is more significant for our present purposes is that—at the same time as the Fourth Estate, and consequently mass media as we know it, was developing as never before, when transmitting information and news became secondary to selling an image—women were entering spheres previously considered beyond their bounds and enjoying a certain success. Such changes in women's ascribed, prescribed, and proscribed roles, however, were not always greeted with enthusiasm by either sex. As late as 1921, Ella Hepworth Dixon wrote, "In Art, as in Literature, it is only during the last few years that women have become completely emancipated.... For fifty years men have been assiduous in assuring women that they had no creative talent, and that no woman would ever achieve a masterpiece." Uncharacteristically for her, she continues, "It was a depressing period."16

In a move that paralleled Katharine Bradley's study abroad in 1868 at the Collège de France, the two sisters apparently undertook art training not only in London but in Paris, although it is difficult to be precise about the exact dates. When their father died suddenly at the end of 1879, their mother Mary Ann Hepworth Dixon appealed to the Royal Literary Fund for financial assistance, and in her March 1880 letter of thanks specified that the money would "be of great service in educating my children; my daughters in their Art and my little boy in his general education."7 *Galigani's Messenger* indicates that a month later, in April 1880, "The Misses Dixon" were in Paris, staying at the Hotel Meurice, suggesting perhaps that this was a time when they were pursuing their artistic ambitions alongside Marie Bashkirtseff, for on several occasions in their periodical contributions, both Ella and Marion refer to having studied at the famous Académie Julian at the same time as the celebrated Russian artist who was there from 1877–1881.9 Somewhat surprisingly then, the names of the Hepworth Dixon sisters do not figure in the archives of the Académie. On the other hand, they do appear from 1877 to 1884 in the catalogues of the Royal Society of British Artists and of the Society of Women Artists in London,10 which testifies to the ambitions of the two young women, both of whom contributed oils as well as watercolors, landscapes, flower pictures, and portraits.

The next time the names of Ella and Marion Hepworth Dixon appeared in public, however, was as signatures to articles of fiction and non-fiction, in journals such as the *World,* the *Sunday Times* and the *Magazine of Art.* It is worth noting that the sisters were thereby participating in one of the most radical changes taking place in the literary world in the last years of the nineteenth century: the shift for women from anonymity or pseudonyms to the use of one's own name. Like Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, Ella also used a pen-name, "Margaret Wynman," but I have no evidence that Marion ever did.

The sisters both abandoned the brush for the pen, but what happened in the intervening years to bring this about is open to speculation. Even in her memoirs, Ella Hepworth Dixon makes no mention at all of her change of career, merely commenting on her "singularly happy working life."12 They were nonetheless never far from the world of art. Marion remained primarily an art critic, "one of our most successful and sympathetic art critics," according to the author of a series of articles on "Lady Journalists" in the *Lady's Pictorial* in 1894, which also mentions that "at Julien's [sic] famous studio ... she became a fellow-student of Marie Bashkirtseff."13 The article draws attention to her contributions to a variety of periodicals, including the *Art Journal,* the *Black and White,* and the *Magazine of Art.* In the last of these—in an overview of art critics by M.H. Spielman, himself a reputed critic—Spielman refers to "sister critics," who were apparently "legion; but... few who are an honour to their craft"; yet Marion is given special mention as one of the "best and most deservedly known of the lady-writers."14 On the whole, whether writing for a specifically female readership as in the *Lady's Realm,* or for a more general, albeit specialized, public, as in the *Studio* or other art journals, Marion produced primarily rather traditional pen portraits of various artists, usually members of the Royal Academy or aspirants thereto.

Likewise, Ella, in both her fiction and non-fiction, continually drew on her knowledge of art and artists, but not always, it has to be acknowledged, in the kindest fashion. For example, she regularly vituperated against the Royal Academy, claiming on one occasion that "We have most of us, indeed, in the gaiety of our hearts and in our impatience with academic processes, thrown, at one time or another, a stone at the institution in Picadilly."15 In an article in praise of Clara Montalba, she bemoaned the fact that it has been left to Italy—who did so much honour to another famous Englishwoman, Elizabeth Barrett Browning—to put the crowning touch to the career of Clara Montalba. To be formally invited to send one's portrait to the
Uffizzi Gallery in Florence is an honour which falls to few painters. It is some years since I was in the City of Flowers, but if my memory serves me right, only Madame Vigée Lebrun and Angelica Kauffmann represent our sex in that famous collection. That there existed among Englishwomen a painter who ought long ago to have been elected to the Royal Academy has been for years patent to all who care for art in this country. But those who are familiar with the internal workings of the Royal Academy know that there is no chance for a woman—even a woman of genius—being elected to that body. The wheels within wheels which exist in that much-abused institution out-rival the most complicated watch. 16

Ella Hepworth Dixon's own background clearly provided her with the necessary insight to see through the artifices of the artistic world. Her witty pen—like that exercised by Bradley and Cooper in their journal "Works and Days"—also enabled her to draw memorable portraits of both the producers and the consumers of art/Art. My Flirtations (1892), her first published book, abounds with satirical comments. "Father is a Royal Academician, and paints shocking bad portraits, but the British public is quite unaware of the fact," declares Margaret Wynman, the first person narrator of the series of sketches, thus setting the tone from the beginning for an ironic appraisal of late-Victorian cultural mores:

We live in a nest of artists. Next door they paint Oriental subjects, and hire a dusky Arab—more or less genuine—who wears a turban, and opens the front door at tea-parties. A dozen yards farther up the street they supply the thoroughly English idyl—young ladies in white muslin sitting on September lawns; young gentlemen in riding-breeches, who are either accepted or rejected. Just opposite they do sea-pictures—the old woman shading her eyes with her hand; the young woman in despair, with the careless infant at her knee. . . . On Show Sunday the British public wanders in and out, sublimely ignorant of whether it is in the house of Smith, R. A., or Robinson, A. R. A. 17

My Flirtations chronicles the protagonist's encounters with prospective husbands, and much fun can be had in trying to work out the real-life inspirations, including Richard Le Gallienne and Oscar Wilde, for some of the suitors. Among these figures is, in chapter 11, a M. René Levasseur, a painter, one of the new school of vibristes. He did the most extraordinary little landscapes, all in pink, and mauve, and arsenic-green stripes, which looked well enough about ten yards off, but which were bewildering enough to our British eyes, when inspected at close quarters. Other French painters, however, were enthusiastic over his work. "Tiens—très fort, ce garçon!" they would say, gazing at a mountain put in with mauve and rose-coloured lines; "beaucoup de v'lan; très-amusant. Il est dans le mouvement, celui-là; il tient de Monet." Accustomed to the treacly sunset landscape, as depicted annually on the walls of Burlington House, we were not a little amazed at M. René's "vibrations"—notes of dazzling sunlight and white open air. Like most of his painter-compatriots, he was very amusing. For the French artist, unlike his English brother, has a number of theories, which he can usually express in a more or less attractive way. To be sure, he is generally a pessimist; but to mention this is only to say that the French artist is eminently modern.

One day M. René painted me. He did me in a scarlet gown, with a scarlet parasol, in full sunlight, against the blue Mediterranean, and I remember he painted my face in scarlet and purple zigzags. Even my worst enemy has never accused me of vanity, but I must say I was annoyed. 18

Later in her acclaimed New Woman novel, The Story of a Modern Woman (1894), Ella Hepworth Dixon's tone is rather darker, revealing, as it does, varying contemporary conceptions, and misconceptions, about women and art. The modern woman of the title, Mary Erle, on the death of her father, intends to "try her hand at art." Success at art school "meant so much to her. . . . It meant independence, a profession, a happy union." But the reactions of her fiancé, Vincent Hemming, and of her best friend, Alison Ives—described elsewhere as an eminently modern woman herself—are revelatory. Vincent was relieved, distinctly relieved, when Mary announced her intention of adopting art as a profession. Painting, especially in water colours, he considered an eminently ladylike occupation; it was, indeed, associated in his imagination with certain drawings of Welsh mountains and torrents, executed by his mother with the prim technique of the forties, which now adorned his chambers in the Temple. 19

Alison, however, exclaims,

"No woman ever made a great artist yet, . . . but if you don't mind being third-rate, of course go in and try. I suppose it'll mean South Kensington, the Royal Academy, and then—portraits of babies in pastel or cottage gardens for the rest of your life." 20

The most successful artist in the book, Perry Jackson, bluntly admits to seeing election to the Royal Academy in terms of E.s.d. and is content to paint what the public wants, so long as he can "make the thing pay." Having abandoned "the foolish pretence at work," Mary turns her hand to writing, and her descriptions, for example, of "Press day at the galleries of the Society of United Artists—the Benighted Artists, as they were called at a certain club consecrated to the fine arts," suggest that perhaps ultimately she was better off in Grub Street: "Every where was the obvi-
ous, the threadbare, the banal; everywhere there was a frank appeal to the Philistinism of the picture-buying public." Ella Hepworth Dixon's depiction of this sordid scene, moreover, suggests why Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper might have preferred to retreat to the world of museums and to the paintings of the past, as they did in their 1892 volume of picture-poetry, *Sight and Song*.

With *The Story of a Modern Woman*, it is tempting to draw autobiographical parallels between author and character, especially as the initials of the two female protagonists are 'A. L.' and 'M. E.,' but Ella Hepworth Dixon did in fact write a book of memoirs, "As I Knew Them," her last published work in 1930, in which, significantly, but perhaps not surprisingly, she begins by positioning herself in relation to the world of Art, rather than the world of Letters. The introductory anecdote she tells in the Foreword is particularly pertinent, since she in fact presents herself from both sides of the canvas. She first describes the admiration aroused in an unnamed captain of a well-known regiment by a portrait of herself which had hung in the Royal Academy. The young man had come to her house in an attempt to purchase the portrait from her mother. He is, unfortunately, merely enamored of an artistic representation, or misrepresentation, and immediately flees from the real-life model who, "grubby with oil-paint . . . [and] dressed in an unbecoming black jersey," bursts in on the discussion. Woman as the object of art is "very earnestly" worthy of admiration; woman as the agent of art, on the other hand, is shied away from. Interestingly, the only other occasion on which she mentions her own artistic practices is when she describes her initial encounter with Oscar Wilde (who was also a friend of Bradley and Cooper): "The first time Oscar Wilde loomed on my horizon I was painting, together with Charlotte McCarthy and my sister, a portrait of Justin McCarthy the younger, in their hospitable house in Bloomsbury."

To some extent, it could be said that in content and style "As I Knew Them" reflects the artistic movements of Ella Hepworth Dixon's youth, and allusions from the register of the visual arts permeate the text to remind the reader throughout that the "I" who speaks and the "eye" that sees were trained in a "serious French studio." The fragmented structure of the narrative recalls both the strokes of pure pigment that characterize Impressionist paintings and the dots of color of Pointillist art, the overall image being held together by Ella Hepworth Dixon's consciousness or memory. Some feminist critics might argue that the result is similar to the quilting effect often associated especially with American women's writing, but even if one were to accept the underlying notion, quilting would seem too prosaic and too tangible for Ella Hepworth Dixon. An anonymous critic in the *Times Literary Supplement* rightly noted, "there is not much substance to these sketches of well-known people." The overall impression is thus more in keeping with what Virginia Woolf calls the "luminous halo" of life, or the "illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark" evoked by her fictional woman artist, Lily Briscoe.

"Ceci n'est pas une critique" might well be the leitmotiv of Ella's and Marion Hepworth Dixon's representations of their contemporary art world. It was a world which, thanks to their upbringings and artistic training, they knew intimately. It was not, however, a world easily accessible to women. Like those of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, the Hepworth Dixon sisters' contributions to it were long assigned to the oubl|iettes of history. Nevertheless, I would argue that a re-evaluation—paralleling the rediscovery of Michael Field—of their lives and varied literary output might serve to enhance our understanding of a period which witnessed "a change such as the world . . . [had] not yet seen."

4. Lady's Pictorial, 10 February 1894, 176.

7. Mary Ann Dixon to the Royal Literary Fund, 2 March 1880, British Library, Archives of the Royal Literary Fund, M 1077/83, file no. 2087. By this stage only three of Ella Hepworth Dixon's siblings were still alive—an older brother, Harold, age twenty-seven; at Oxford, her sister Marion, age twenty-three; and her younger brother, Sydney, age eleven.

8. 'List of English and Americans Registered Yesterday,' Galignani's Messenger, 5 April and 3 May 1880.

9. See in particular Marion Hepworth Dixon, "Marie Bashkirtseff: A Personal Reminiscence," Fortnightly Review, February 1890, 276-82, and Ella Hepworth Dixon, "Pensées de Femme," Lady's Pictorial, 10 August 1895, 157, in which the latter refers to a time when she "studied painting in the studio of M. Charles Chaplin and afterwards in the more Bohemian Atelier Julian in the Passage des Panoramas." A few years later in the same periodical, Ella writes: "The painter's world in Paris...is at once simpler and more complicated than ours. Every famous artist has his school of pupils, and sometimes the monitress, or chief lady-pupil becomes the wife of the 'master'; as witness the marriages of Mlle. Bouguereau to Miss Elizabeth Gardner, and of M. Julian to Mlle. Amélie Beaury-Saurel. Mlle. Amélie—as we used to call her when I worked some years ago in the Passage des Panoramas—was a slim girl with the red-gold hair of an aristocratic Spaniard. Between her and Marie Bashkirtseff there existed a perpetual feud. ("Pensées de Femme," Lady's Pictorial, 6 February 1897, 184.)

10. The Royal Society of British Artists lists for Miss Hepworth Dixon and Miss Ella Hepworth Dixon (not always making it clear which one it means) 1877, Fatima £10.00; 1878-79, Study in Blue and Yellow, £4.6s; 1879-80, Down the Avenue (Ella), £5.5s; 1883-84, Evening, £8.8s. The Society of Women Artists refers to 'Ella Hepworth Dixon, Painter,' gives her address as 6, St James's Terrace, Regent's Park, London, and lists 1880, Rhododendrons (watercolor), £5; and 1881, In the Bois de Boulogne (oil), £7. For 'Hepworth Dixon, Painter' (no first name, but same address), it lists 1877, A Study (oil), £5; Lormi (oil), £20; 1878, Windmill Near Boulogne, £7; 1879, Geraniums; £2; and 1881, A French Dish (oil), £10.

11. The earliest signed articles I have found so far date from 1888, but, according to an interview in Woman in 1894, Ella had been contributing stories to the World for over ten years.


13. Lady's Pictorial, 10 February 1894, 176.


18. Ibid., 147-49.


20. Ibid., 42.

21. So far, I have been unable to identify the artist or to locate the portrait. The Royal Academy merely lists works exhibited, but in those days it kept no visual copies.


23. The phrase is Alison Ives's, from Dixon's Story of a Modern Woman, 71.
