As She Knew Him: As Ella Hepworth Dixon Knew Oscar Wilde
(revised version)

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As She Knew Him

When did Ella Hepworth Dixon first meet Oscar Wilde?
I’m afraid, as with most of Ella Hepworth Dixon’s life and memoirs, much remains vague and imprecise, so I can give no specific date. Since she first mentions Oscar Wilde in the context of her own painting, I presume it was in the late 1870s, early 1880s before she abandoned her paint-brush for a pen, and embarked on her long writing career. She then contributed to The Woman’s World, formerly The Lady’s World, when Oscar Wilde was in the editorial chair (from 1887-9) and had renamed the magazine. In her memoirs she comments on the “unstinted praise which is so rare in Editors” which he gave to a story she had written. She refers to it as “Murder or Mercy”, but it was actually entitled “Murder – or Mercy? A Story of Today”, and I would argue contains some embryonic elements of her later celebrated New Woman novel The Story of a Modern Woman (1894), recently republished by Broadview, and still very readable. Throughout the period of Oscar Wilde’s editorship, she contributed many unsigned “interviews at home” as well as a few other signed non-fiction articles, notably “Women on Horseback” and “On Cloaks”, which both attracted the attention of reviewers and may have facilitated her future success in finding work with the likes of Arnold Bennett who could be so scathing of women journalists. She also contributed one more signed short story after Oscar Wilde’s departure, and then she, too, moved on.

Although I have no evidence that they ever worked together after that, Oscar Wilde did not completely disappear from her horizon. She mentions meeting him on social occasions, and, to my mind, he makes several appearances in various guises in her fiction.
Did Ella Hepworth Dixon know Constance?

She never actually mentions Contance in the memoirs, but I cannot imagine that they did not meet on social occasions, simply because in their circle I suspect that everyone knew everyone. This was not always an advantage. For example, after William Hepworth Dixon’s rather sudden death in 1879, William Michael Rossetti’s diary entry for January 9, 1880, suggests that the financial difficulties of the Hepworth Dixons were no secret: “Mrs. Gilchrist and her younger daughter called: also Mrs Garnett who says that Mrs Hepworth Dixon and her family will certainly be unable to continue living in their present house (tho’ it is their own property), and that the chief support of the family at present is a son, Harold, who has a Chemical Professorship at Oxford estimated (but Mrs G. fears overestimated) at £400 or £500 a year. An effort will be made to obtain a good literary pension for Mrs D.” Marian Hepworth Dixon did indeed appeal, with success, to the Royal Literary Fund for assistance, much as Constance did a few years later.

Where is Ella’s portrait?

I would love to know. She only tells us that it hung in the Royal Academy when she “came out”, and that it was a painted by French woman artist. I have searched the archives of the Royal Academy several times in vain, partly because for those years there are merely lists of paintings, there are no visual reproductions, and, although there are innumerable “portraits of young women”, “youthful beauties”, “girls by windows”, etc., I could find none entitled “Ella Hepworth Dixon”. However, even if I were certain of the title and/or the artist, that would not tell me where the painting is today.

Likewise, Boldini painted at least one portrait of Ella and her sister Marion at Etretat, and when I came cross The Complete Works of Boldini, I thought I had struck gold, but many of the reproductions have similarly vague titles and
are about the size of a postage stamp! I keep hoping someone will write and tell me they have seen the portrait hanging in a gallery or private home.

Where are Ella’s paintings?
I wish I knew. Again, I keep hoping they will turn up.

There are always surprises in the kind of research I have undertaken. A few years ago a fan of Ella’s traced me via the net and wrote telling me she thought she had found Ella’s grave – in a tiny churchyard in Wales. This struck me as rather strange as I knew Ella had been cremated in Golders Green, and I had never come across a Welsh link before. Moreover, Ella was such a city person, I was not altogether convinced that friends would have erected a monument to her in “Wild Wales”. On the other hand, as coincidence would have it, I often went to Wales, since my thesis director was in Aberystwyth, and I was about to attend a conference in Swansea, very near the cemetery in question. After a very friendly exchange of letters with the local tourist office and the vicar, I had managed to arrange a reconnaissance trip – only to discover at the eleventh hour that my informant had got the name wrong – the grave belonged to another Dixon, also a Victorian woman writer, but called “Emma”, not “Ella Hepworth”.

Why did she give up painting?
She rarely refers to her artistic training or ambitions except indirectly through her fiction, but in both her fiction and non-fiction she regularly vituperates against institutions such as the Royal Academy. I think it was quite simply extremely difficult for women to make a career in Art in those days. Writing was in general a much more acceptable means whereby a lady could earn her living, although there were ongoing debates about what subjects were suitable. In this respect, Ella Hepworth Dixon did not restrict herself to conventional “womanly” topics, and, in fact, very often her weekly contributions to journals
such as *The Westminster Gazette* did not even appear on “The Woman’s Page”. Most of her writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, however, was published in women’s magazines, and she even became that rara avis a woman editor when a new magazine, *The Englishwoman*, began in 1896. This was a short-lived experience, through no fault of her own, but due to the vicissitudes of the publishing world, as was her stint on *The Daily Mirror* when it began as a ladies’ daily in 1903.

*Was she involved in the Suffragist movement?*

One would expect that she would have actively campaigned for women’s rights, but, although she regularly wrote about issues such as equality, she herself admits that she “never burned for her faith”, although she adds “which is a shameful thing”. This is all the more curious because she had received a relatively avant-garde education, including being sent to Germany to study with her brothers, and as late as 1928 she railed against the fact that, since she was not a property-owner, the right to vote still escaped her. It has to be said I have found no evidence either of her taking a public stand in defence of Oscar Wilde during the period of his trials. She remains essentially a very private person, and I am even tempted to think that her prime motivation for writing her memoirs was to preclude anyone else from undertaking the task.

*Did it help that she had a famous father?*

I suspect that originally it might have helped, although by the time of his death her father was rather more infamous than famous. Certainly the circles she had moved in enabled her to embark on a journalistic career. For example, she mentions that Edmund Yates, another of her first editors, had been a friend of her people. Family contacts, however, would not have kept her in work if she had not shown some talent, and, as far as I can gather, she was continually in
work for over four decades, publishing her last articles just a few years before her death in 1932.