‘A restless intellect’: Florence Dixie (1855–1905)

By Valentina Bold

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Charles Waddle: ‘Lady Florence was a true Scottish patriot, and gave her unqualified support to the Scottish Home Rule movement […] In […] Glasgow, she addressed a large meeting in favour of Irish Home Rule, and I remember being struck with the fervour of some Irish women who, with tears in their eyes, kissed her hand as if she had been a Queen.’[1]

Florence Caroline Dixie, née Douglas, as these tributes suggest, was an extraordinarily active writer and campaigner: novelist, poet, dramatist, children’s writer, and pioneering war correspondent. Invariably controversial, she wrote about women’s rights and was outspoken in her support for Scottish and Irish Home Rule. She corresponded with Darwin, her *True Science of Living* was

discussed in the *British Medical Journal*. She contributed to the *Agnostic Journal* and opposed vivisection.[2] After the Zulu war, she successfully campaigned for the repatriation of Cetewayo. Dixie, equally, made the news. Striking in appearance, she kept her hair short and unornamented, despite being reprimanded at court. Widely respected – and regularly attacked (once physically) – in her lifetime, she is now largely neglected; an intriguing aside to feminism or to agnosticism. Dixie deserves better. Here, it is only possible to give a flavour of her bravura style. I hope, soon, to write her long-overdue, critical, biography.[3] What follows is very much work in progress.

I first encountered Dixie in the early 2000s, when I was working through the manuscript collection of Frank Miller, Secretary of Annan Literary Society. There, I found a scrap of a letter, dashed off (it seemed) at speed:

> *Glen Stuart,*
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> *Dear Sir, I expect you do not know how ill I am with rheumatic gout, or you wld not have asked me to lecture. I have been laid up a long time & can hardly move & have not been out of the house for 4. Months. I fear therefore it is out of the question that I could comply with yr. wish.*
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> *Yrs. very truly*
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> *Florence Dixie.*[4]

This curt response immediately brought to life a woman of firm character.[5] The letter took me out of Miller's story and into Dixie's.

Miller's *Poets of Dumfriesshire* (1910) includes a biographical account of Dixie, born Florence Caroline Douglas in 1855, in Belgravia. Her father, Archibald William, 8th Marquis of Queensberry (1818–1858) died, by his own gunshot, when Dixie was three. The subsequent conversion of her mother to Catholicism was significant:[6]

> *Lady Florence was brought up in the Catholic religion. Her restless intellect, however, failed to find satisfaction in the theology of the Church; and at an age when most girls care for nothing but tennis and hockey she was engaged in a painful struggle with religious doubts. A dramatic tragedy entitled 'Abel Avenged,' [published 1877] written in her fifteenth year, and a poem called 'The Sceptic's Defence', written at sixteen, show the nature of the young thinker's difficulties.*

In 1875 Dixie married Sir Alexander Beaumont Churchill Dixie, eleventh baronet (1851–1924). She published *Across Patagonia*, based on their travels, in 1880. In 1880–1 she was war correspondent for *The Morning Post* and reflected on her African experiences *In The Land of Misfortune* (1882) and *A Defence of Zululand and its King* (1882). She died in 1905 at Glen Stuart. Miller quotes Dixie's *Songs of a Child* (1901), written between the ages of ten and seventeen:

> *expression is given to the future explorer's desire for travel in strange places:*
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The 'restless intellect' Miller notes also features in Dixie's obituary in *The Gallovidian* of 1905, by Stewart Ross:[7]

> *from early childhood […] [Florence Dixie] gave evidence of marked individuality […] she felt more absorbing interest in books of her own selection than in such as the governess prescribed […] a fearless rider and a dauntless swimmer. She was fond of fields and flowers, of woods and hills and streams, and indulged in pensive musings in solitude. Theological tenets she dared to question whenever she perceived them to be in conflict with reason and experience or with humane impulse (p. 196).*

As one of the distinguished Douglas family, prominent since 1297, Dixie could trace her descent back to Sir William Douglas, supporter of William Wallace, and father of the Sir James Douglas who endeavoured to take Bruce's heart to

Palestine, and was mortally wounded in Spain. Dixie's ancestors included the 'dead Douglas who won the field' at Otterburn, Gavin Douglas, Bishop of Dunkeld (who translated Virgil and is mentioned in *Marmion*) and the Duke of Queensberry involved in the Union of the Parliaments.

With her twin brother James, Dixie was the youngest of seven. Her Irish-born mother, Caroline Margaret Clayton (1821–1904), 'the beautiful Lady Drumlanrig' was raised Anglican by her English father and Irish Catholic mother. Dixie's brother, John Sholto, 9th Marquis of Queensberry, remembered for the 'Queensberry Rules', is described by Ross as, 'chivalrously brave'; a freethinker, he forfeited his seat in the House of Lords when he refused to take the religious oath; he later became President of the British Secular Union. His son, Alfred Douglas, was Oscar Wilde's 'Bosie'. Dixie herself, Ross states, was 'fair as that Ellen Douglas who is the immortal "Lady of the Lake;" self-sacrificing as the Catherine Douglas who in the Black Friars' Abbey at Perth, to save King James I. of Scotland from assassination, thrust her arm into the socket from which treachery had withdrawn the bolt, and had the limb fractured'.[8]

When Dixie's mother and her offspring converted, in 1861, there were threats to remove the children. The youngest three children accompanied their mother to France, where they lived for two years, under the protection of Emperor Napoleon III. A more settled life ensued and Dixie spent her childhood, with occasional forays to Europe, between Glen Stuart, Belgravia and her maternal grandparents' estate at Harleyford. There, she enjoyed eavesdropping at table, where scepticism was discussed, and guests included Benjamin Disraeli and George Holyoake. Dixie dressed identically to her twin, referred to herself as a boy, and rode astride horses, confidently.[9] Educated at convent school, her faith did not last, although her elder brother, Archibald, became a priest; her sister, Gertrude, a nun for a time.

Tragedy dogged the family. Dixie's twin, James, took his own life in 1891; her brother Francis died aged eighteen, descending from the first conquest of the Matterhorn. Dixie, however, had many advantages. Her beauty, like her mother's, was celebrated. Robert Bulwer-Lytton was entranced, by the 'pensive' child; her 'mass of auburn hair'; 'dreaming face', 'earnest eyes' and 'rosebud lips'.[10] As an adult, she made a striking wife.

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None of this does justice to Dixie's work. It ranges from the predictable to the unexpected. Her juvenilia, *Songs of a Child and other Poems* (1902) is of the first type, and of its time.[11] It is heartfelt, melancholic and sentimental, unlike her later work. *Songs* appeared under Dixie's childhood nickname of 'Darling' – her twin brother was 'Dear'. 'In Memoriam. Written on Hearing of the Death of Lord Lytton in 1873' (p. 3) has echoes of Robert Louis Stevenson: 'When all misunderstood midst haunts of men' the 'lonely child' with a muse which 'sought to right foul wrong' found a 'kindred spirit' in Lytton. 'Father' (pp. 4–5) is poignant and personal, Pet Marjorie style:

DEAR FATHER, I hardly recall you,
When you died I was only three,
And yet sometimes I do fancy too
Your face in a vision I see […]

I remember your kiss at parting
With I and my dear brother twin,
I remember the sad home coming
When they bore your dead body in.

There is nascent cleverness, though, in the conceit of 'Only just over the Border. An Ode to Death' (pp. 10–11) and ambition in 'The Death of Robespierre. A Sequel to Zanoni' (pp. 112–14). The *Songs*, taken together, exhibit an urge to moralise – again, typical of her period.[12]

Dixie's children's novels, equally, are didactic. *The Young Castaways; or, the Child Hunters of Patagonia* (1899)[13] draws on Dixie's travels in a book, 'written alike for girls as well as boys […] the Author hopes that there are many boys and

girls into whose hands it may fall who are of the same right stuff as Harry and Topsie, whose adventures are sketched in this tale.' As the title suggests, this book has echoes of *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), and of H. Rider Haggard. *Little Cherie. Or the Trainer's Daughter. A Racing and Social Novel* (1901) is a little more imaginative. The eponymous heroine is inspired by the establishment of an Utopian community in Zululand by the (perhaps autobiographical) clear-sighted Lady Irene:

> *'It is my commonwealth […] In that village below I have established workshops of all kinds, and yonder on the hillside is our famous dairy. Then I have a spinning and weaving factory, where white men and Zulus work happily and cordially together, for it is the law of my commonwealth that all who live therein must work, and each worker shall enjoy a fair share of the proceeds of his or her toil and labour. Here there is no poverty, for poverty cannot exist alongside the laws that prevail […] my commonwealth is looked upon as the dream of a crank or an enthusiast. It may be so; but I think not. Perhaps some day it will become a reality.' (p. 206)*

There is, of course, a *News from Nowhere* (1890) influence here, but the strong narratorial voice, and first-hand memories, are distinctively Dixie.

The most complex of Dixie's children's books is T*he Story of Ijain; or The Evolution of a Mind, with Epilogue by 'Saladin'* (1902). Ijain was a childhood nickname, and Dixie uses familiar names here: Dugald for Douglas, Marleyford for her grandparents' home, Harleyford. The intention is explicit: '"The Story of Ijain" […] is written […] in the earnest hope of making clear to many […] the cruelty practised on the young, of subjecting them to the orthodox religion of the day' (pp. iii–iv). Parable style, the central characters, twins, are introduced at the age of three years and three months (a reference to Christ's ideal age of 33). The pair, dressed in kilts, lie beside a burn:

> *Suddenly a lark went soaring upwards, pouring forth its song of praise […] the little boy spoke.*
>
> *"Sis," he said, "lark gone up to see God."*
>
> *"And lady God too," put in the little girl […]*
>
> *"No, no, no, no!" shouted the boy, sitting up.*
>
> *"Yes, yes, yes, yes!" came the little girl's defiant answer.*

> *"Nan, nan," cried the boy, "Sis says lark's gone to see lady God. Me says lark's gone to see God. Me's right; isn't me right?"*
>
> *Nurse stopped nodding, and answered, decisively, "Yes, Lord Rorie, of course. There's no such thing as a lady God. Lady Ijain, you are very naughty […] You know where naughty children go to" […]*
>
> *The little girl pouted, "Me and Rorie, papa and mamma, God and lady God," she reasoned.*
>
> *"Serse me!—serse me! you wicked child. I'll whip you," said the nurse. (p. 2)*

Ijain grows becomes increasingly adventurous, and sceptical about a God she cannot observe, and is continually rebutted by her nurse. The book, considering her experiences, examines the confusing nature of religious doctrine for children, and adults' duty of care:

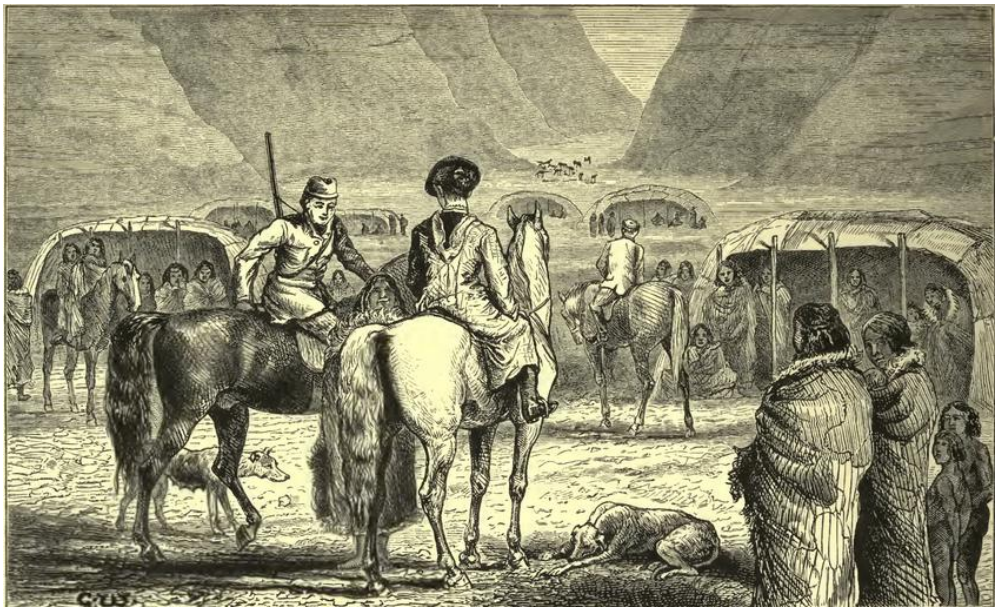
> *'Oh! parents and nurses, have a care how you instruct the budding mind. What seems nothing to you, who have grown too lazy, or callous, or ignorant to think, is often a source of anxiety and even terror to the little child' (pp. 11–12).*

Similar issues are explored in Dixie's play *Isola; or the Disinherited* (1904), first serialised in *Young Oxford* (1902).[14] This promotes, 'the Reign of Truth and the Destruction of Humbug'. The 'true laws of the only God' include, 'Justice for *all living things*, from Ruler to Subject, *of either sex*, and for the brute Creation'. 'Superstition' should be rejected: 'in its wake follows Misery' (pp. vii–ix). Dixie comes close to modern environmentalism, promoting 'peace, contentment and joy' for all creatures rather than 'blood, carnage, cruelty, torture, suffering and *injustice*'; 'Nothing Natural can be aught but right, for it is the offspring of Nature, the only true God' (pp. viii–x). George Holyoake, to whom the book is dedicated, remarked of Dixie, 'I know of no one, save Shelley, who, at so early an age was troubled about the questions she discusses with such generous passionateness'; 'Isola is a Lady Macbeth of a nobler kind, but has the same undaunted spirit […] Her conception of womanly independence is *original in literature*' (p. xi). Original, certainly, but Dixie is in agreement with her brother's *Marriage and the Relation of the Sexes. An Address to Women* (1880). Although she does not go as far as Queensberry's argument for 'plurality' in marriage,[15] she shares his view, 'the laws of God are the laws of nature' (p. 11).

Izra (1905), dedicated to Queensberry, also offers moral insights into Truth: 'Izra is a child of solitude refusing to be deprived of his inherent right to think'. The 'right to think', for Dixie, always outweighs the need to conform – something not all her contemporaries admired. Reviewing *Izra*, *The Scotsman* classed Dixie as an ideologically-driven woman with 'a reputation for unconventionality', 'emancipated' in mind:

> *The problem novel we know already. Here we have the propagandist novel, in which we have boiled down, and presented to us under the seductive form of fiction, the programmes of the Independent Labour party, the Social Democratic Federation, the Anti-Vivisection Society, the Anti-Gambling League, the Women's Rights Association, &c. &c […] the reader may take it for granted […] that wherever, in any part of the world, there are social offenders who might well be under the ground, and who never would be missed, she's got 'em on the list.*[16]

This is a fair observation. Dixie's fiction and prose is invariably position-driven, including: *Waifs and Strays: The Pilgrimage of a Bohemian Abroad* (1880); *Redeemed in Blood* (1889); *Gloriana, or the Revolution of 1900* (1890); *Aniwee, or the Warrior Queen* (1890); *Little Cherie […] A Racing and Social Novel* (1901) and *The Mercilessness of Sport* (1901).



Florence Dixie, *Across Patagonia* (1880)

Dixie is, arguably, at her strongest in her travel writing, and journalism. *Across*

Patagonia (1880) describes a journey with her brothers, Lord Queensberry and Lord James Douglas, her husband and their friend Julius Beerbohm, author of *Wanderings in Patagonia* (1879),[17] who illustrated Dixie's book. Experiences are captured in lyrical, sometimes humorous, emotionally engaged sketches which vividly evoke place and people. Here, for instance, Dixie describes leaving Rio:

> *As a precious jewel is encrusted by the coarse rock, the smiling bay lies encircled by frowning mountains of colossal proportions and the most capricious shapes. In the production of this work the most opposite powers of nature have been laid under contribution. The awful work of the volcano; the immense boulders of rock which lie piled up to the clouds in irregular masses, have been clothed in a brilliant web of tropical vegetation, spun from sunshine and mist.*[18]

Dixie was equally interested in those she met, including the indigenous Tehuelche people. Reflective of her period, there are 'noble savage' assumptions here but Dixie is, equally, observant. Tragically, she was right in thinking, 'the Tehuelches are a race that is fast approaching extinction'. She admired the nomadic nature of Tehuelche life. Although she thought the men 'extremely lazy', the women were 'indefatigably industrious'. She admired, too, Tehuelche devotion in marriage, and to their children (pp. 67–69). Dixie, incidentally, brought more than memories home. Having accidentally disturbed, and shot, a jaguar, she brought her cub to Windsor where, along with a tiger, it enjoyed climbing trees and swimming in the Thames. When Dixie left for Africa, the animals were given to the Zoological Gardens.[19]

Animal rights are a recurrent theme as, for instance, in Dixie's article against 'The Horrors of Sport', for *The Westminster Review*:[20]

> *"Sport" is horrible […] I, whom some have called a "female Nimrod," have come to regard with absolute loathing and detestation, any sort or kind or form of sport, which in any way is produced by the suffering of animals […] I have ended with the sharp yet merciful knife the dying sufferings of poor beasts who had never harmed me, yet whom I had laid low under the veil of sport; I have seen the terror-stricken orb of the red deer, dark, full of tears, glaring at me with mute reproach as it sobbed its life away, and that same look I have seen in*

> *the eyes of the glorious-orbed guanaco of Patagonia, the timid, gentle gazelle, the graceful and beautiful koodoo, springbok, &c., of South Africa […] It is a remnant of barbarism in our natures that we should take pleasure in displaying our skill on living animals. (pp. 49–50).*

Dixie describes the suffering of game birds, 'tame and hand-reared pheasants' and the 'dead-beat fox, worn out, with lolling tongue, heaving sides, bedraggled brush' waiting to be 'torn limb from limb, disembowelled, and reduced to a shapeless mass of bloody, bedraggled fur'. That all of this is not replaced by 'well-laid drags', is due to a 'callous indifference to sufferings of animals' due to 'upbringing'; 'I will never again raise gun or rifle to destroy the glorious Animal Life of Creation' (pp. 50–52). These heartfelt words developed into *The Horrors of Sport* (1905).

Dixie felt equally strongly about women's rights, in marriage, work, and through suffrage, as a piece in the *Daily Chronicle* indicates:

> *Nothing will solve the marriage problem but the revision of bad laws selfishly imposed on women. The revolution of women has set in. The tide is steadily rolling on. Nothing will stay it now but the creation of natural and just laws. I have been asked various questions as the labour of working women […] a girl, whether she is the daughter of a Queen, Duchess, or middle-class dame, or working woman, should be as far as possible consulted as boys are on the profession or work she wishes to adopt, and accordingly brought up and educated.*[21]

Dixie's advocacy for marital and educational parity was pursued in her personal life: 'in that marriage form […] in which a woman is bidden pronounce the words 'love, honour, and obey,' I did not pronounce them, merely substituting, 'er, er, er,' in a low voice for them'. In refusing to 'swear my liberty away and proclaim an inferiority to my husband', she adds, 'I did not feel I have not proved less a wife, companion, and friend'.[22]

Dixie's views were not without critics but found supporters too. When Gladstone spoke against women's suffrage, some 'Liberal ladies, hitherto staunch supporters of Mr Gladstone, who have declared their intention of working against him'

expressed their agreement with Dixie's position. She observed, '"Cringing […] has never won anything […] cringing to Mr Gladstone will win nothing but an approving smile from Mrs Gladstone."[23]

Dixie never cringed; her political outspokenness on the Irish question led to an attempt to assassinate her – or not. As she walked in Windsor in 1883, two men attempted to assault her. Her butler was injured but her dog saved them. There was debate as to whether this was a 'Fenian' plot (which she discounted) or fantasy. The attack, the rumour Dixie fabricated it, her refutations, and Irish gratitude for her support of Home Rule, widely featured in the press from the *Glasgow Herald* to the *Manchester*, *Irish* and *Cardiff Times*.

In the *Morning Post*, writing as Zululani, Dixie documented the Anglo-Zulu war first-hand. As she said herself, 'It might sound something novel to the public […] if they heard I had gone out as a correspondent and the paper might sell accordingly'.[24] She was correct. Writing in the Transvaal, Dixie has been described as an 'unquestioning Imperialist'[25] but she showed independence of thought in supporting Zululand. She writes, as about Patagonia, with directness, without drama, and evocatively. Describing a journey to Pietermaritzburg, for instance, in April 1881, Dixie notes:

> *the roads […] are in a terrible state, the post carts have almost all ceased running […] Horses are scarce and treble in value, and the most common means of conveyance difficult and expensive to obtain […] the road up country is by no means clear or free; small parties of Boers have been seen patrolling in many places, and the risk of losing one's horse, rifle ammunition, and personal effects is anything but small.*[26]

Dixie's journalism was sometimes subject to ridicule – the *London Figaro* described her, tongue in cheek, as a 'fair Amazon'. I prefer Miller's 'restless intellect'.

In this short piece I cannot do full justice to the prodigious, outspoken output of Florence Dixie. I hope to have given a sense of her significance and skill. Campaigning journalist, visionary for 'Truth', novelist for adults and children, travel writer, poet, dramatist; the work of this distinctive Scot richly deserves

further scrutiny.

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When they bore your dead body in.

There is nascent cleverness, though, in the conceit of 'Only just over the Border. An Ode to Death' (pp. 10–11) and ambition in 'The Death of Robespierre. A Sequel to Zanoni' (pp. 112–14). The *Songs*, taken together, exhibit an urge to moralise – again, typical of her period.[38]

Dixie's children's novels, equally, are didactic. *The Young Castaways; or, the Child Hunters of Patagonia* (1899)[39] draws on Dixie's travels in a book, 'written alike for girls as well as boys […] the Author hopes that there are many boys and girls into whose hands it may fall who are of the same right stuff as Harry and Topsie, whose adventures are sketched in this tale.' As the title suggests, this book has echoes of *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), and of H. Rider Haggard. *Little Cherie. Or the Trainer's Daughter. A Racing and Social Novel* (1901) is a little more imaginative. The eponymous heroine is inspired by the establishment of an Utopian community in Zululand by the (perhaps autobiographical) clear-

sighted Lady Irene:

> *'It is my commonwealth […] In that village below I have established workshops of all kinds, and yonder on the hillside is our famous dairy. Then I have a spinning and weaving factory, where white men and Zulus work happily and cordially together, for it is the law of my commonwealth that all who live therein must work, and each worker shall enjoy a fair share of the proceeds of his or her toil and labour. Here there is no poverty, for poverty cannot exist alongside the laws that prevail […] my commonwealth is looked upon as the dream of a crank or an enthusiast. It may be so; but I think not. Perhaps some day it will become a reality.' (p. 206)*

There is, of course, a *News from Nowhere* (1890) influence here, but the strong narratorial voice, and first-hand memories, are distinctively Dixie.

The most complex of Dixie's children's books is T*he Story of Ijain; or The Evolution of a Mind, with Epilogue by 'Saladin'* (1902). Ijain was a childhood nickname, and Dixie uses familiar names here: Dugald for Douglas, Marleyford for her grandparents' home, Harleyford. The intention is explicit: '"The Story of Ijain" […] is written […] in the earnest hope of making clear to many […] the cruelty practised on the young, of subjecting them to the orthodox religion of the day' (pp. iii–iv). Parable style, the central characters, twins, are introduced at the age of three years and three months (a reference to Christ's ideal age of 33). The pair, dressed in kilts, lie beside a burn:

> *Suddenly a lark went soaring upwards, pouring forth its song of praise […] the little boy spoke.*
>
> *"Sis," he said, "lark gone up to see God."*
>
> *"And lady God too," put in the little girl […]*
>
> *"No, no, no, no!" shouted the boy, sitting up.*
>
> *"Yes, yes, yes, yes!" came the little girl's defiant answer.*
>
> *"Nan, nan," cried the boy, "Sis says lark's gone to see lady God. Me says lark's gone to see God. Me's right; isn't me right?"*
>
> *Nurse stopped nodding, and answered, decisively, "Yes, Lord Rorie, of course. There's no such thing as a lady God. Lady Ijain, you are very naughty […] You know where naughty children go to" […]*
>
> *The little girl pouted, "Me and Rorie, papa and mamma, God and lady God,"*

she reasoned.

"Serse me!—serse me! you wicked child. I'll whip you," said the nurse. (p. 2)

Ijain grows becomes increasingly adventurous, and sceptical about a God she cannot observe, and is continually rebutted by her nurse. The book, considering her experiences, examines the confusing nature of religious doctrine for children, and adults' duty of care:

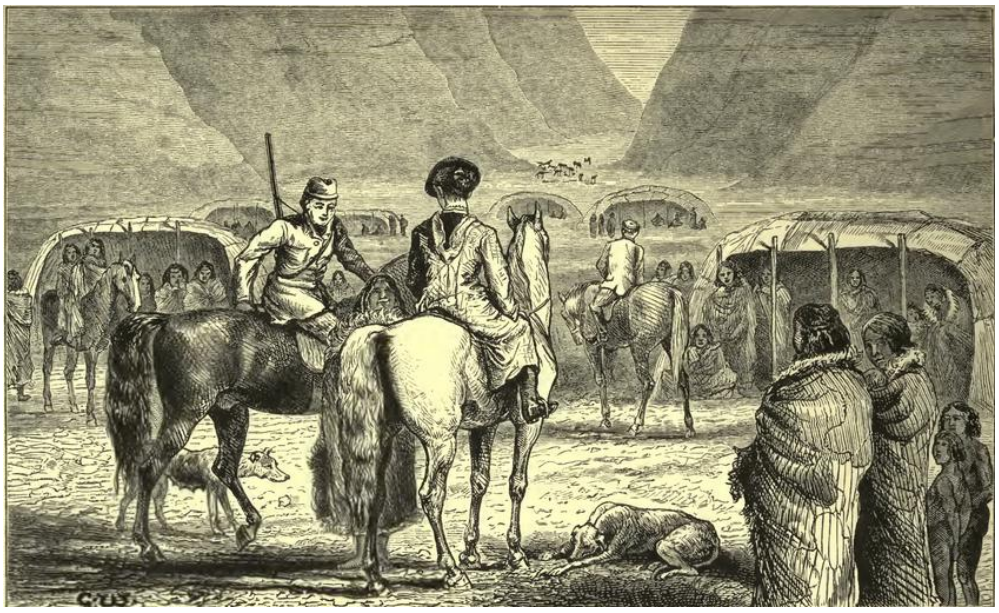
'Oh! parents and nurses, have a care how you instruct the budding mind. What seems nothing to you, who have grown too lazy, or callous, or ignorant to think, is often a source of anxiety and even terror to the little child' (pp. 11–12).

Similar issues are explored in Dixie's play *Isola; or the Disinherited* (1904), first serialised in *Young Oxford* (1902).[40] This promotes, 'the Reign of Truth and the Destruction of Humbug'. The 'true laws of the only God' include, 'Justice for *all living things*, from Ruler to Subject, *of either sex*, and for the brute Creation'. 'Superstition' should be rejected: 'in its wake follows Misery' (pp. vii–ix). Dixie comes close to modern environmentalism, promoting 'peace, contentment and joy' for all creatures rather than 'blood, carnage, cruelty, torture, suffering and *injustice*'; 'Nothing Natural can be aught but right, for it is the offspring of Nature, the only true God' (pp. viii–x). George Holyoake, to whom the book is dedicated, remarked of Dixie, 'I know of no one, save Shelley, who, at so early an age was troubled about the questions she discusses with such generous passionateness'; 'Isola is a Lady Macbeth of a nobler kind, but has the same undaunted spirit […] Her conception of womanly independence is *original in literature*' (p. xi). Original, certainly, but Dixie is in agreement with her brother's *Marriage and the Relation of the Sexes. An Address to Women* (1880). Although she does not go as far as Queensberry's argument for 'plurality' in marriage,[41] she shares his view, 'the laws of God are the laws of nature' (p. 11).

Izra (1905), dedicated to Queensberry, also offers moral insights into Truth: 'Izra is a child of solitude refusing to be deprived of his inherent right to think'. The 'right to think', for Dixie, always outweighs the need to conform – something not all her contemporaries admired. Reviewing *Izra*, *The Scotsman* classed Dixie as an ideologically-driven woman with 'a reputation for unconventionality', 'emancipated' in mind:

> *The problem novel we know already. Here we have the propagandist novel, in which we have boiled down, and presented to us under the seductive form of fiction, the programmes of the Independent Labour party, the Social Democratic Federation, the Anti-Vivisection Society, the Anti-Gambling League, the Women's Rights Association, &c. &c […] the reader may take it for granted […] that wherever, in any part of the world, there are social offenders who might well be under the ground, and who never would be missed, she's got 'em on the list.*[42]

This is a fair observation. Dixie's fiction and prose is invariably position-driven, including: *Waifs and Strays: The Pilgrimage of a Bohemian Abroad* (1880); *Redeemed in Blood* (1889); *Gloriana, or the Revolution of 1900* (1890); *Aniwee, or the Warrior Queen* (1890); *Little Cherie […] A Racing and Social Novel* (1901) and *The Mercilessness of Sport* (1901).



Florence Dixie, *Across Patagonia* (1880)

Dixie is, arguably, at her strongest in her travel writing, and journalism. *Across Patagonia* (1880) describes a journey with her brothers, Lord Queensberry and Lord James Douglas, her husband and their friend Julius Beerbohm, author of *Wanderings in Patagonia* (1879),[43] who illustrated Dixie's book. Experiences are captured in lyrical, sometimes humorous, emotionally engaged sketches which vividly evoke place and people. Here, for instance, Dixie describes leaving Rio:

> *As a precious jewel is encrusted by the coarse rock, the smiling bay lies*

> *encircled by frowning mountains of colossal proportions and the most capricious shapes. In the production of this work the most opposite powers of nature have been laid under contribution. The awful work of the volcano; the immense boulders of rock which lie piled up to the clouds in irregular masses, have been clothed in a brilliant web of tropical vegetation, spun from sunshine and mist.*[44]

Dixie was equally interested in those she met, including the indigenous Tehuelche people. Reflective of her period, there are 'noble savage' assumptions here but Dixie is, equally, observant. Tragically, she was right in thinking, 'the Tehuelches are a race that is fast approaching extinction'. She admired the nomadic nature of Tehuelche life. Although she thought the men 'extremely lazy', the women were 'indefatigably industrious'. She admired, too, Tehuelche devotion in marriage, and to their children (pp. 67–69). Dixie, incidentally, brought more than memories home. Having accidentally disturbed, and shot, a jaguar, she brought her cub to Windsor where, along with a tiger, it enjoyed climbing trees and swimming in the Thames. When Dixie left for Africa, the animals were given to the Zoological Gardens.[45]

Animal rights are a recurrent theme as, for instance, in Dixie's article against 'The Horrors of Sport', for *The Westminster Review*:[46]

> *"Sport" is horrible […] I, whom some have called a "female Nimrod," have come to regard with absolute loathing and detestation, any sort or kind or form of sport, which in any way is produced by the suffering of animals […] I have ended with the sharp yet merciful knife the dying sufferings of poor beasts who had never harmed me, yet whom I had laid low under the veil of sport; I have seen the terror-stricken orb of the red deer, dark, full of tears, glaring at me with mute reproach as it sobbed its life away, and that same look I have seen in the eyes of the glorious-orbed guanaco of Patagonia, the timid, gentle gazelle, the graceful and beautiful koodoo, springbok, &c., of South Africa […] It is a remnant of barbarism in our natures that we should take pleasure in displaying our skill on living animals. (pp. 49–50).*

Dixie describes the suffering of game birds, 'tame and hand-reared pheasants' and the 'dead-beat fox, worn out, with lolling tongue, heaving sides, bedraggled

brush' waiting to be 'torn limb from limb, disembowelled, and reduced to a shapeless mass of bloody, bedraggled fur'. That all of this is not replaced by 'well-laid drags', is due to a 'callous indifference to sufferings of animals' due to 'upbringing'; 'I will never again raise gun or rifle to destroy the glorious Animal Life of Creation' (pp. 50–52). These heartfelt words developed into *The Horrors of Sport* (1905).

Dixie felt equally strongly about women's rights, in marriage, work, and through suffrage, as a piece in the *Daily Chronicle* indicates:

> *Nothing will solve the marriage problem but the revision of bad laws selfishly imposed on women. The revolution of women has set in. The tide is steadily rolling on. Nothing will stay it now but the creation of natural and just laws. I have been asked various questions as the labour of working women […] a girl, whether she is the daughter of a Queen, Duchess, or middle-class dame, or working woman, should be as far as possible consulted as boys are on the profession or work she wishes to adopt, and accordingly brought up and educated.*[47]

Dixie's advocacy for marital and educational parity was pursued in her personal life: 'in that marriage form […] in which a woman is bidden pronounce the words 'love, honour, and obey,' I did not pronounce them, merely substituting, 'er, er, er,' in a low voice for them'. In refusing to 'swear my liberty away and proclaim an inferiority to my husband', she adds, 'I did not feel I have not proved less a wife, companion, and friend'.[48]

Dixie's views were not without critics but found supporters too. When Gladstone spoke against women's suffrage, some 'Liberal ladies, hitherto staunch supporters of Mr Gladstone, who have declared their intention of working against him' expressed their agreement with Dixie's position. She observed, '"Cringing […] has never won anything […] cringing to Mr Gladstone will win nothing but an approving smile from Mrs Gladstone."[49]

Dixie never cringed; her political outspokenness on the Irish question led to an attempt to assassinate her – or not. As she walked in Windsor in 1883, two men attempted to assault her. Her butler was injured but her dog saved them. There was debate as to whether this was a 'Fenian' plot (which she discounted) or

fantasy. The attack, the rumour Dixie fabricated it, her refutations, and Irish gratitude for her support of Home Rule, widely featured in the press from the *Glasgow Herald* to the *Manchester*, *Irish* and *Cardiff Times*.

In the *Morning Post*, writing as Zululani, Dixie documented the Anglo-Zulu war first-hand. As she said herself, 'It might sound something novel to the public […] if they heard I had gone out as a correspondent and the paper might sell accordingly'.[50] She was correct. Writing in the Transvaal, Dixie has been described as an 'unquestioning Imperialist'[51] but she showed independence of thought in supporting Zululand. She writes, as about Patagonia, with directness, without drama, and evocatively. Describing a journey to Pietermaritzburg, for instance, in April 1881, Dixie notes:

> *the roads […] are in a terrible state, the post carts have almost all ceased running […] Horses are scarce and treble in value, and the most common means of conveyance difficult and expensive to obtain […] the road up country is by no means clear or free; small parties of Boers have been seen patrolling in many places, and the risk of losing one's horse, rifle ammunition, and personal effects is anything but small.*[52]

Dixie's journalism was sometimes subject to ridicule – the *London Figaro* described her, tongue in cheek, as a 'fair Amazon'. I prefer Miller's 'restless intellect'.

In this short piece I cannot do full justice to the prodigious, outspoken output of Florence Dixie. I hope to have given a sense of her significance and skill. Campaigning journalist, visionary for 'Truth', novelist for adults and children, travel writer, poet, dramatist; the work of this distinctive Scot richly deserves further scrutiny.

(c) The Bottle Imp