

“RARE GIFTS” COMPARED: HOPKINS AND DIXON

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In 1978, Florence Boos published a thorough and informative essay in which she examined Hopkins's debt to Richard Watson Dixon's Christian Pre-Raphaelite poetry. Subsequent critics have expanded our understanding of Hopkins's poetry in relation to Victorian religious discourse (see Blair 197-231), but none have equalled Boos's insights as to why, and especially how, the author of “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” “The Windhover,” and the harrowing sonnets of desolation benefited from prolonged contemplation of *Christ's Company, and Other Poems* and *Historical Odes, and Other Poems*. When citing the many occasions in which Hopkins expresses both his admiration and profound affection for Dixon's works, Boos briefly quotes from the summary of Dixon's canon and career that Hopkins wrote for Thomas Arnold's *Manual of English Literature*.¹ It is that short bio-critical essay, reproduced below, that I wish to explore further.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Hopkins's article is that it exists at all: he was forever launching a project with fanfaring enthusiasm – a scientific study, a treatise on a classical author, a verse drama, a commentary on the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola, a musical composition – only to report some time later, despondently, that he had been unable to finish or even properly begin it. But the entry for Arnold's *Manual* was different, because Hopkins, always intensely loyal, knew that it was a rare opportunity to appraise and promote a poet and a canon that had become “almost wholly unknown.”

Dixon, who had been one of Hopkins's instructors at Highgate School in 1861-62, was the model for Middleton, the Pre-Raphaelite artist featured in Hopkins's undergraduate “Platonic Dialogue: On the Origin of Beauty” (*Collected Works* 4:136-72). Among Hopkins's personal papers, there are his handwritten copies of favourite Dixon poems made in the mid-1860s; in 1884, when composing the entry for the *Manual*, Hopkins could recall and quote entire poems – memorable, no doubt, because of Dixon's skill in evoking pathos, and how well his “description and imagery are realised with a truth and splendour not less than Keats' own.” Their friendship – primarily episto-