

PRE-RAPHAELITE IMAGERY IN THE CHRIST'S COMPANY POEMS OF
RICHARD WATSON DIXON

Richard Watson Dixon is best known for his correspondence with Gerard Manley Hopkins and his friendship with the Pre-Raphaelites at Oxford in the 1850s. Hopkins, Robert Bridges, D. G. Rossetti, and Algernon Swinburne all praised Dixon's poetry. Yet even his most sympathetic and astute reader, Hopkins, remarked on the poetry's "obscurity . . . suggesting a deeper meaning behind the text without leaving the reader any decisive clue to find it." Hopkins also suggested that Dixon's imagery especially deserved investigation; he found the most appealing qualities in Dixon's poetry to be its "pathos" and "richness of image."¹ However, Hopkins did not explain if or how this richness of image relates to the problem of obscurity.

Criticism on Dixon's imagery has provided more questions than answers. Florence Boos, in her recent article "Christian Pre-Raphaelitism: G. M. Hopkins' Debt to Richard Watson Dixon," says of the two that

Both rejected the heterodoxy of Pre-Raphaelitism, but accepted Pre-Raphaelite definitions of "beauty" and "design." Both valued emblematic, bright coloration, detailed description, and paradoxical evocations of love and pain.²

Boos recognizes that Dixon's brightly colored descriptions have a design, but she does not explain what it is. Most of those who discuss Dixon's imagery assert that he is a Pre-Raphaelite to the extent that his imagery exists for its own sake and obscures the meaning or unity of his work.³ Of his early poem "St. John," for instance, Robert Bridges says, "It is as if Keats had turned Pre-Raphaelite. The spare places in the main design are filled up with an excess of beauty which escape the reader."⁴

The comments of Bridges and Boos do suggest, however, that George P. Landow's recent investigations of William Holman Hunt's paintings have some application to Dixon's poetry. In William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism Landow discusses how the Pre-Raphaelites were criticized for dividing, by their attention to detail, a work into discrete sections. Hunt, a seminal figure in Pre-Raphaelitism, used symbolic detail in his later paintings, and these paintings were unified by the comment this symbolism made on the whole. The symbolism justified the detail, but the viewer had to meditate on the various parts until he grasped their contribution to the whole.⁵ Landow's