

“Our lightye and learned tyme”: William Turner and the Baths at Bath

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In sixteenth-century England, bathing was associated with treatment of disease rather than with personal hygiene, and spas such as Bath were surely not known as centers for entertaining the elite of society as in later ages. The first chronicler of the serious, therapeutic uses of such watering places was William Turner, a physician-priest who believed in using natural baths for treating disease. His treatise on the baths, published by Arnold Birckman at Cologne in 1562 with a dedication to Lord Edward Seymour, was the first printed work on the baths at Bath.¹

Often called the father of English botany,² Turner served as Dean of Wells from 1551 to 1553. Since Wells was only fifteen miles from Bath, Turner had opportunity to visit the Bath waters often. After the accession of Mary in 1553, he fled to the continent and remained there five years. During that period, Turner began to write about the waters of Bath and to visit natural baths in Germany and Italy. Returning to England in 1558 after Elizabeth came to the throne, he preached to a large congregation at St. Paul's on September 10 of the following year. He was reinstated Dean of Wells in 1560, with his treatise on Bath being published two years later. A second edition, also published by Birckman, appeared in 1568 with a preface written at Basel during Turner's exile. Dated March 10, 1557, the preface is addressed to "his welbeloved neighboures of Bath, Bristow, Wellis Winsam and Charde."³ In addition to his printed work, Turner also wrote about the baths in his commonplace book. Part of the matter duplicates the treatise, and part does not. Such material appearing in a section of the commonplace book devoted to medicine reads like a doctor's casebook.⁴

In the 1557 preface, Turner says he has

written so wel as I can of the bath of Baeth in England, to allure thither as manye as have nede of such helpe as almighty God hath graunted it to gyve: wherof that I wote of no man hath written one word that ever I could rede. Wherfore if that I write not so perfittly of it, as som perfit idle overseers would that I should have done: I truste that all honeste men will pardon me, because I had no helpe of anye writers that wrote of it before me. (*Bathes*, iir)

Turner states that physicians have never before made proper use of the baths for treatment of patients:

When these baths have ben of long tyme knowen, even above a thousand yeares, ether the unlearnednes or the enviousnes of the Physiciones, which have ben in times past, is greatly to be rebuked, because ether for lak of learning knew not the vertues of these bathes, or els for enviousnes wold not send the sik folk, whom they could no otherwyse hele unto these bathes. . . . But nowe in this our lightye and learned tyme, after that so many learned Physiciones have so greatly commended these bathes. (*Bathes*, lv)

Turner recognizes that the baths are in need of improvement but does not believe that any rich men will be willing to spend money on them to help the sick. He observes that plenty of money is spent on “cockfitinges, tenesplayes, parkes, bankettinges, pageantes and playes serving only for a shorte tyme that pleasure oft tymes, but of privat persones, which have no nede of them.” But he has not heard of any rich man spending anything “upon these noble bathes, beyng so profitable for the hole comon welth of Englande, one grote these twintye yeares” (*Bathes*, lv).

Turner explains that the primary element in the Bath waters is brimstone or sulfur. He insists that

brimstone is the only mater in these bathes, or ellis the chefe that beareth ruel in them. For they drye up wouderfullye, and heale the goute excellentlye, and that in a shorte tyme, as wyth diverse other one myles somtyme, one of my Lorde of Summersettes players can bear witnes. (*Bathes*, lr)

The bath near St. John’s Hospital, he says, is a mixture of brimstone and copper; the king’s bath contains brimstone and alum, and the crosse bath has brimstone and saltpeter (*Bathes*, iiv). Contrasting the Bath waters with the ones he has seen in Germany and Italy, Turner remarks on the superiority of the continental baths. He believes the English would be accused

of thre thinges, of grosnes, and brutish ignorance, because we can not trim our bathes no better of unkindnes, because we do so lightly regard so hygh and excellent giftes of allmighty God, of bestly filthines, because we make no partition between the men and the weomen, whilse they are in bathing, but suffer them contrary both unto the law of God and man to go together lyke unreasonable beastes to the destruction of body and soul of very manye. (*Bathes*, lv-2r)

Turner makes numerous suggestions about needed improvements for the baths. He says every bath should “have an hole in the botome, by the whych the stophole taken out the bath should be clenged and scoured every xxiiiij houres at the lest ones.” Each bath should be cleaned at eight o’clock in the evening in order to be clean each morning when the bathers arrive. Such cleanliness would insure that more people would be healed of their diseases and less likely to

get more from bathing. Each bath should have a covering to be used during inclement weather only; the rest of the time the bath should be open so that "the vapores myght go oute, leste they that have evel heades, be hurte with the vapores whych are to muche holden in." He wants lofts built above the baths with a hole which would allow fresh water to be drawn through it. In this way, "honest weomen or other which would not gladly be sene in the bathes, might ever have as oft as they nede freshe water drawn unto them thorow an hole." The used water should not be thrown back into the bath below but conveyed out in some other way. He also suggests that the water brought up might serve a half-dozen or more chambers. To aid in the treatment of those suffering "som kindes of dropsees and goutes," Turner would like "a little house after the maner of a scaffolde" built near the hottest water so that "the hote vapores myght strike hote upon certayn places of mannis body." He urges separate facilities, too, for those suffering from infectious or horrible diseases (*Bathes*, 2r-2v).

In recommending bathing as a treatment, Turner makes clear bathing is not to be used initially but as a last resort when other remedies have failed. He says that "wise and learned Physicians" prescribe that "ye should not at any tyme go into any bath to seke remedye their for any sicknes, excepte it be such one, that almoste the learned Physicians dispayre of the healinge of it" (*Bathes*, 14v). Before taking the baths, the patient must prepare spiritually. He must think of any way he may have displeased God and ask forgiveness. Then he should discuss with the physician

what complexion ye be of, and what humor or other thinge is the cause of your disease, and by his advice maye ye go unto suche bathes, as he shall thyncke moste mete for youre disease, and there after his counsell use suche diet, as shall be most fitt for your complexion and sicknes.
(*Bathes*, 14v-15r)

The rules for taking the baths are set forth carefully. Turner cautions the patient not to enter the bath without purging himself once or twice as ordered by the doctor, for "if any man go unprepared and unpurged to the bath, he maye fortune never come home agayne, or if he come home, he commeth home most commenly with a worse disease then he brought to the bath wyth him" (*Bathes*, 15r). Turner advises the patient to prepare his body with a "preparative drinke" seven days before entering the bath and on the eighth day to be purged (*CB*, I, 21r). The patient may not go to the bath the day he arrives but must rest a day or two before bathing. The best months for taking the baths are May and September, but springtime is the best time of all. The time of day to take the waters is a half hour or an hour after sunrise. And if possible, the patient should walk half an hour or an hour before bathing (*Bathes*, 15r). He may stay in the

bath half an hour the first day, an hour the second day, and after that much longer, but not long enough to become faint (*CB*, I, 21v). The patient should take the waters for one month. Men must abstain from sexual activity at this time and for a month afterward (*Bathes*, 16r).

When he enters the bath, the patient should have an empty stomach, and he should not eat and drink while there. For some weak persons, Turner recommends a little bread soaked in pomegranate juice. For any person who cannot tolerate hunger before going to the bath, Turner suggests two spoonfuls of raisins with one part of wine and one part of diluted wine, prunes soaked in water, or two spoonfuls of bread crumbs soaked with water and wine. The head must be covered in the bath to prevent colds, and after bathing, the patient should dry off thoroughly, cover himself to prevent a cold, go to a warm bed and sweat; he may sleep half an hour to an hour if he needs it. After sweating and sleeping, the patient should rest and walk a bit and then go to dinner, "for by measurable walkinge the vapours and windynes that is caughte in the bath, is dryven awaye" (*Bathes*, 15v).

The diet to be followed is carefully prescribed. Bread should be "well leavened and thorouly baked," and the meats allowed are "smal byrdes and other byrdes of the felde and mountaynes that are of easy digestion."⁵ Forbidden meats are "salt beafe and bacon, pigeons, quales pies and pasties." The patient should not eat cherries and similar fruit, garlic, onions, hot spices, cold meats, and most fish. Among the drinks mentioned, Turner forbids milk, unless the patient craves it, and then he may have some as long as he drinks it two hours before he eats any meat, and he must not drink any afterward. Light white wine is allowed or white wine that is diluted with water (*Bathes*, 16r). The drink Turner prefers is "well sodden ale, neither to weke nor to stronge for bere is counted hurtfull a gret deale more than ale is" (*CB*, I, 21r). The patient is forbidden to eat or drink anything cold "least when as ye are hote wythin by your bathinge and sweatinge, the colde stricke sodenly into som principall membre and hurte it" (*Bathes*, 16r).

The treatment Turner prescribes for a patient suffering from "rume and goute" includes bathing and diet. Concerning the diet, Turner writes,

Absteyne from all cole sallowes from salt fishe and all other fishe that want scales and the to muche use of all fishes . . . from new bere new ale new wyne, from sacke and malmesey. . . . Your best meates ar finches and suche other small byrdes larkes . . . blackebyrdes . . . phesantes partridges . . . cockes, hethcockes and especially such as ar yonge. . . . Your meates must rather be rosted then sodden. . . . Ye may not slepe on the day nor drinke betwene meles except gret nede compell ye thereto. Ye may not excede ii kyndes of meat at one mele neither eat fishe and fleshe together at one mele. . . . Defend the nape of your necke, the soles of your fete the wrestes of your handes and also your mouthe from gret wyndes and cold ayres. (*CB*, I, 24r).

For some patients Turner recommends the use of the clay or earth from the baths rather than bathing. Such patients are urged to place the mud on the diseased place and let the sun or a hot fire bake it until it becomes hard. Then the patient is to wash away the clay with the bath water. This treatment is especially recommended for dropsy, "shronken, swelled, and harde places" (*Bathes*, 16v). Turner urges patients to take a small vessel full of the clay home with them to "warne the same and lay it hote upon the desese places every day onis" (*CB*, I, 22r).

After the bathing is over and the patient is released, Turner cautions him to stay on his diet for a month or "ellis ye shall lese all the labores that ye have taken" (*CB*, I, 22r). And he must lead a life of moderation. Turner advises,

When as ye go homewarde, make but small journeys, and beware of surfetinge and colde, and when ye are at home, use measurable exercise daylye, and honest myrthe and pastyme wyth honest companye. And beware of surfeting in anye wyse, and of anger, and of to muche studye or carfulnes. (*Bathes*, 17v)

William Turner's work on the baths is important because it is the first printed treatise on the Bath waters and because he provides detailed information as a practicing physician about bathing and diet in treating disease during the Renaissance. Familiar with continental baths in Germany and Italy, Turner understood the possibilities for making Bath into a treatment center for the sick. He was ahead of his time, but perhaps his early work on the baths in a way contributed to the later development of Bath into an important spa.

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NOTES

¹Charles E. Raven, *English Naturalists from Neckam to Ray* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1947), pp. 114-15.

²W. S. C. Copeman, *Doctors and Disease in Tudor Times* (London: Dawson's of Pall Mall, 1960), p. 95.

³William Turner, *A Booke of the natures and properties, as well of the bathes in England as of other bathes in Germanye and Italye, very necessarye for all these persones that can not be healed without the helpe of natural bathes lately oversene and enlarged* (Cologne: Arnold Birckman, 1568); hereafter cited as *Bathes*.

⁴Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution MS. Nos. 4880 and 4877; hereafter cited as *CB*. Turner's manuscript pages were not numbered. The numbers cited in the text are from Johnye C. Sturcken, "The Commonplace Book of William Turner: An Annotated Catalogue" (unpublished dissertation, The University of Texas, 1963).

⁵Some inconsistency appears between the published treatise and the commonplace book on the kinds of small birds suitable for the bather's diet. In the printed treatise, Turner forbids the patient to eat "phesaunts, pertriges, capons, and chykens" (*Bathes*, 16r). In the commonplace book, he says the best meats are "phesantes pertriges cockes hennes and capones that ar not very fat but well fleshed" (*CB*, I, 21r).