"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 neighbours 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 thyther as manye as have nede of such helpe as almighty God hath granted 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 perfity of it, as som perfitye 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 Physicione, 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 Physicione 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 “cockfightinges, 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, beynge 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 wounderfullye, 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, iv). 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 excellente gifts of allmighty God, of bestly filthines, because we make no partition between the men and the weomen, whils they are in bathing, but suffer them contrary both unto the law of God and man to go together lyke unreasoneable 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 bottome, by the whych the stophole taken out the bath should be clenged and scoured every xxiii hours 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