



# Historical Papers

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|

## 'A LOT OF HOT AIR'

### THE TURKISH BATH IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AUSTRALIA

by Susan Aykut



Turkish bath at *Wynstay*, Mount Wilson, NSW\*

In May 2005 I was invited to give a talk to the Mount Wilson & Mt Irvine Historical Society on the subject of my research on Turkish Baths in Australia. As custodians of a building that once housed a Turkish bath, the Society's request, and interest, was logical. However, curiosity in this subject is widening. In 2006, I had the opportunity to talk about Turkish baths on Radio National and at a conference at the University of Queensland <sup>2</sup>. Recently I published 'Washing from the inside out:

Turkish baths down under', in *TAASA Review*, the journal of The Asian Arts Society of Australia <sup>3</sup> and it is reprinted here.

Stories about the Turkish bath in Australia are of interest to disparate audiences for a range of reasons. In the first instance, Turkish baths are considered to be somewhat quirky curiosities that reveal some intriguing, albeit eclectic, aspects about those who built or used them. Increasingly, as the list of Turkish baths established in Australia grows, so too does an awareness that the study of them has the potential to chart some important societal changes in Australian life, such as our transition from the great unwashed to the fanatically scrubbed, and the growing importance placed on the health and well-being of the individual, as well as society at large.

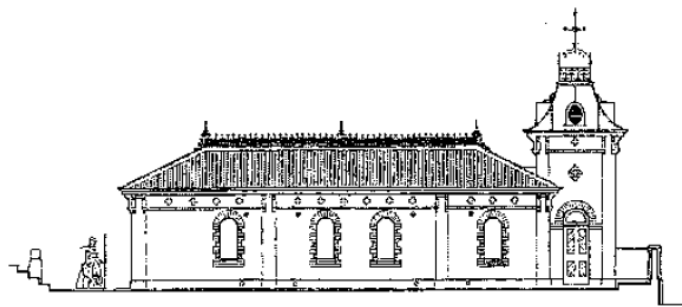
What is of particular note is the speed with which Australia adopted this institution. There was a Turkish bath in Sydney and another Melbourne before there was one in London. Indeed, Australia had four - two in Sydney, 1859 and 1861, one in Melbourne, 1860, and one in Launceston, 1861 - before America got around to its first in New York in 1863. Undoubtedly, the Australian climate was an important contributing factor. New colonists sought ways to allay the heat, dust and discomfort of daily life, and bathing was one practice that was adopted early on. But the interest in baths shows that some of our forebears were far from isolationist their thinking and that the 'tyranny of distance' was perhaps less of an issue in the nineteenth century than has often been thought.

The 'peripheries' clearly mattered, not only on an international stage but also on a domestic one. While the majority of Turkish baths were public establishments found in the capital cities, they were by no means confined there. Regional towns also had them. In Tasmania, Launceston had three separate Turkish baths open in the nineteenth century. In Victoria, both Ballarat and Geelong had one and, in New South Wales, Goulburn and Bathurst petitioned for them, although I have yet to confirm if they were ever built <sup>4</sup>. In Western Australia, one was built in Coolgardie in 1895 to cater for the influx of hopeful prospectors during its gold-mining boom. Two Turkish baths were listed in Queensland street directories for Townsville in the late nineteenth century as well.

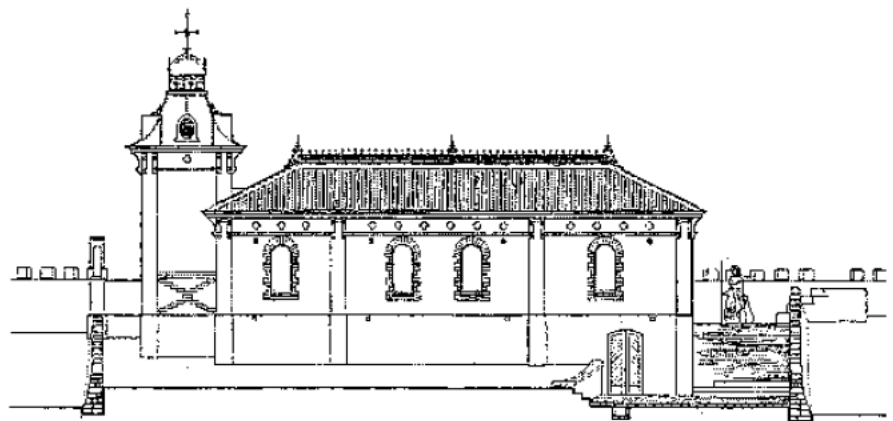
Private Turkish baths also existed in Australia. Only two are confirmed to date: the one at *Wynstay* at Mt Wilson (1880s) and the other at *Dunmore* in the Western District of Victoria (1866). Both buildings still stand. The *Wynstay* structure is in excellent repair, thanks to the work of the Mt Wilson & Mt Irvine Historical Society; the *Dunmore* Turkish bath, on the other hand, is in very poor condition.

Two other private Turkish baths in Australia were reported in the press, predating those built at *Dunmore* and *Wynstay*. Sydney business entrepreneur, Thomas Sutcliffe Mort, allegedly, constructed a private Turkish bath in 1861. Suffering from ill health, Mort had used Turkish baths during a visit to northern England in 1858 on the advice of a disciple of the 'Turkish Bath Movement' in Britain, Dr John le Gay Brereton <sup>5</sup>. Mort then encouraged Brereton to emigrate to Australia, a suggestion Brereton duly heeded, and he and his wife travelled to Australia on the same ship as the Morts the following year. Several months after his arrival in Sydney, Brereton opened the first public Turkish bath in Australia, in October 1859. At the opening of the second public Turkish bath in Bligh Street, Sydney, in March 1861, Mort announced that he 'hoped to have the pleasure of erecting the first private bath in New South Wales; his bath would shortly be completed, and he hoped that others would follow his example'. <sup>6</sup> Mort does not say where this bath was located. There are two possible contenders: his Sydney home, *Greenoaks*, in Darling Point (now called *Bishopscourt*, residence of the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney), which underwent extensive alterations in 1860 by the Colonial Architect, Edmund Blacket; or his country house on his estate at Bodalla, also designed by Blacket. Examination of Mort's and Blacket's papers held in the Mitchell Library has, unfortunately, not confirmed the existence of this bath, or its location, so the search continues.

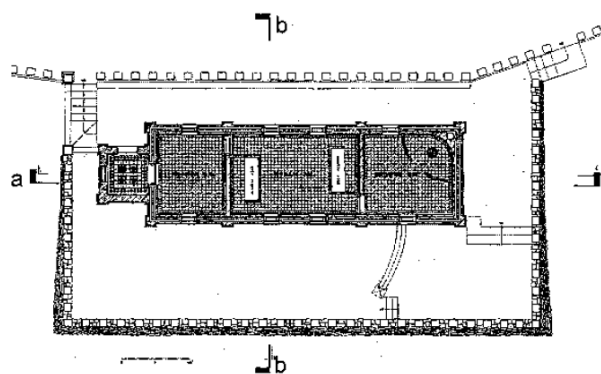
*Illustrations 2 – 7 of the Turkish bath at Wynstay, Mount Wilson: line drawings adapted from originals attributed to 'E Bonney, Architect, Castlereagh Street, Sydney'*



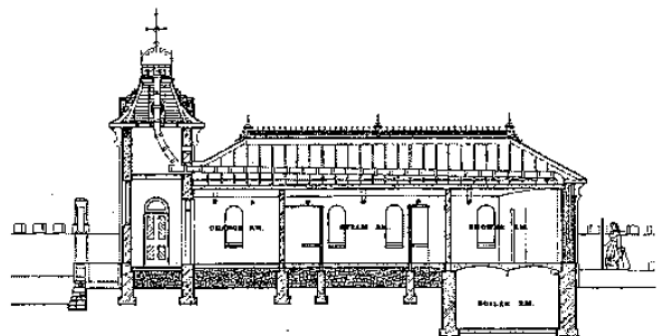
2. South Elevation



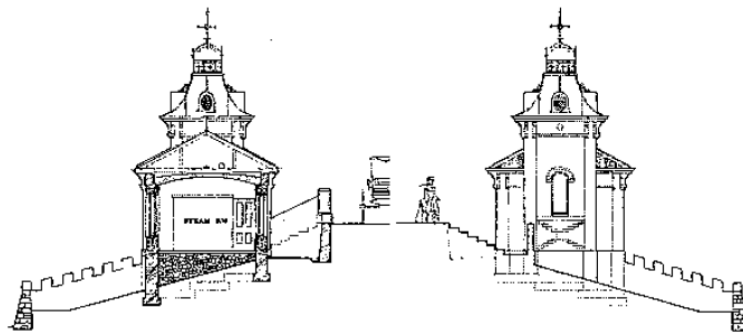
3. North Elevation



4. Floor Plan



5. Section a-a



6. Section b-b

7. East Elevation

Later that year, in September 1861, reference to another private Turkish bath appeared in a small article, also in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. It stated that a Turkish bath existed on a station at Auburn in the Burnett district in Queensland's interior.<sup>7</sup> The owner of the property, Mr B J Pigott, had been the sufferer of debilitating sciatica and claimed he built his own Turkish bath after he had completely recovered from this malady, following a course of Turkish baths. Like Mort's bath, further details about this bath are yet to be found.

A myriad of stories can be told from the wealth of fascinating material I have found, so far, on the subject: 'Washing from the inside out: Turkish baths down under' is one of them. But more and more information is surfacing as interest grows in this subject. Interest has increased, in part no doubt, because of the growth in spas being set up to cater to a steadily expanding market of consumers seeking relaxing and restorative services to offset hectic and/or overindulgent lifestyles. With new, exotic public baths having also been established in cities around Australia in the last decade or so, such as the Roman Baths in Launceston, the Korean Baths in Sydney and Japanese Baths in Melbourne, interest in public bathing practices that have the potential to conserve water, as well as contribute to public health and well-being, is also likely to encourage more research in this area.<sup>8</sup> Far from being just an antiquarian study of a past curio, the history of Turkish baths in Australia may offer much more than just 'lot of hot air'.

## END NOTES

1 'You Must Use the Bath' was originally broadcast on ABC Radio National's Hindsight program on the 16 July 2006 and repeated on 14 January 2007.

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/hindsight/stories/2007/1796918.htm>

2 Australian Modernities Vernacular Performers and Consumers Conference, the University of Queensland, 5 – 7 December 2006.

3 Susan Aykut, 'Washing from the inside out: Turkish baths down under', TAASA Review (The Asian Arts Society of Australia), Vol 16/1, March 2007, pp. 10-12.

4 *The Goulburn Herald*, 12 March, 1862

5 For more information on the 'Turkish Bath Movement' in Britain see Malcolm R. Shifrin's, Victorian Turkish bath website: [www.victorianturkishbath.org](http://www.victorianturkishbath.org)

6 'Opening of the New Turkish Bath', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 March 1861

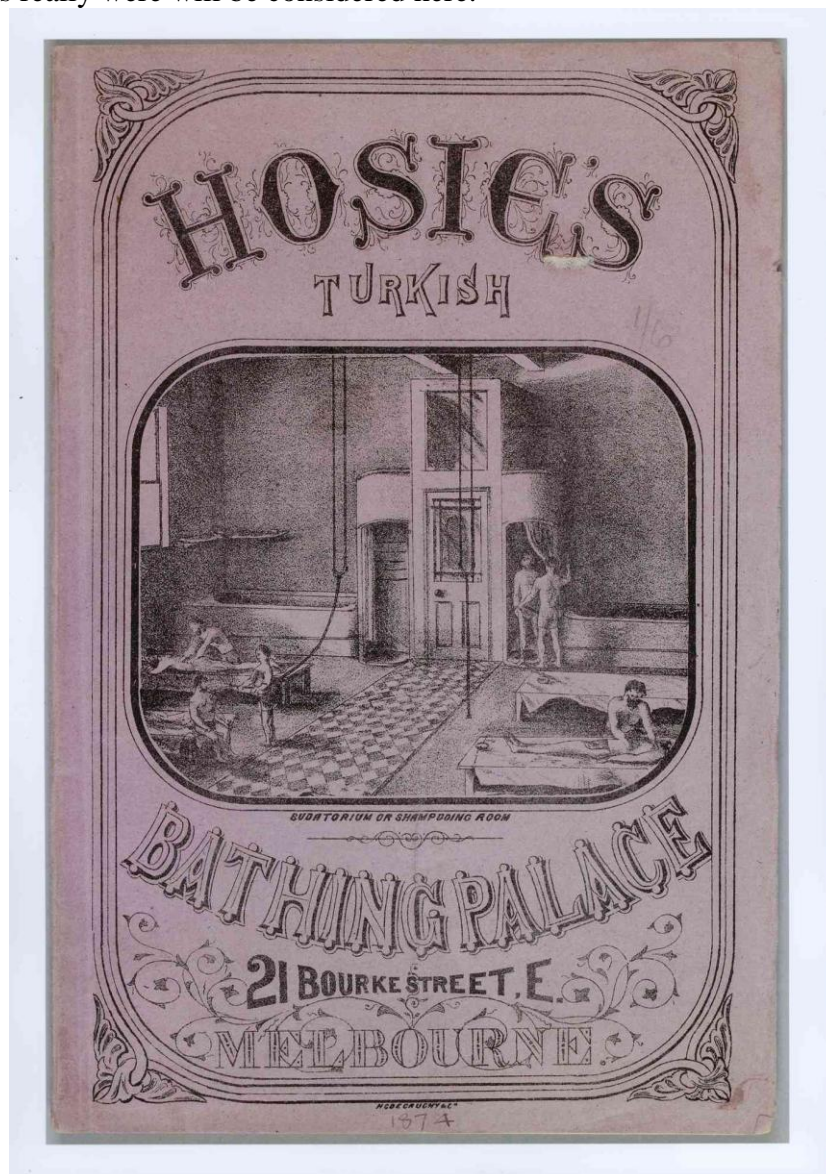
7 'The Turkish bath in the Bush', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 1861

8 The Aquarius Roman Baths are located at 127-133 George St, Launceston, Tasmania, The Korean Baths at Hotel Capital's Centre, 1st Floor, 111 Darlington Road, Kings Cross, NSW (currently closed for renovation of the building); and the Japanese Baths at 59 Cromwell Street, Collingwood, Victoria.

# WASHING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

## TURKISH BATHS DOWN UNDER

More than a decade ago, while I was researching the baths of the Ottoman Turks, the existence of two Turkish baths in Australia was brought to my attention. Although I was intrigued, I filed the information away to continue with the project at hand. My initial suspicion was that these two were exceptions - follies built by travellers retuning from the East. However, as I worked on other projects in various archives and libraries around the country, I investigated the subject further and discovered these were far from being isolated examples. To date, the search has revealed nearly 30 so-called Turkish baths established in Australia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Note below). The first of these Victorian 'Turkish baths' opened its doors in Sydney [Spring Street] in 1859; others were located as far apart as Townsville, Hobart and Perth. Some of the reasons why this bathing custom was adopted in Australia and how 'Turkish' these baths really were will be considered here.



*Hosie's Turkish Bathing Palace, Melbourne, 1874, Rare Printed Collection, State Library of Victoria*

While the idea of Turkish baths in Australia conjures up ideas of Eastern exotica, few buildings in Australia actually conformed to those preconceptions in the way we might have expected. In the first place, the impetus for building Turkish baths in Australia came, rather than directly from Turkey, from the 'Turkish Bath Movement' established in Britain in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century by a maverick Scottish politician called David Urquhart. However, because Urquhart, a Turkophile, used the baths he had seen and frequented in Constantinople as his model, let me begin by describing what a Turkish bath is.

Strictly speaking, the term 'Turkish bath' is a Western descriptor given to a building designed for a particular mode of bathing employed by Muslims. In Turkey it is called a *hamam*, an Arabic word meaning 'Spreader of warmth'. The principles of a traditional Turkish bath lie in the bathing process whereby the bather passes through three chambers that graduate from cold to warm to hot, and back again. Despite being called a bath, a traditional Turkish bath has no 'bath' as such for immersing the body. The mode of washing is based on raising the body temperature sufficiently in the warm and hot chambers for the body to perspire freely; the body is then exfoliated, massaged and lathered with soap, before finally being washed down with water scooped out of a basin. Cleansed of the dirt and deeds of the past, the bather completes the ritual by relaxing in the cold outer chambers before entering the world anew.

Considered essential for religious purification, Turkish baths in their homeland, and in the Islamic world in general, were once as prevalent and as necessary as mosques, that other great symbol of Islamic faith. Often the two were built together. The baths were integral to daily life, not only for purifying before prayer, but also because almost every significant rite of passage of the individual was celebrated or marked in some way in the *hamam*. From womb to tomb, bathing rituals formed a part of every major life event. The *hamam* was therefore a key place in which Ottoman citizens expressed, at one and the same time, their sensual, spiritual, symbolic and social being.

By contrast, Turkish baths in Australia were peripheral rather than central to everyday life. While those constructed in Britain and Australia emulated to some degree the traditional layout of rooms and the washing procedures of bathers, they differed considerably from their Turkish precedents in key ways. Not surprisingly, they were not imbued with the religious imperative for both symbolic and physical cleanliness required of Muslims to practice their faith - at requirement that was not only manifest in the bather's use of the space but also implicit in the design of the bath.

The architectural relationship between the bather and God is most evident in the womb-like inner hot chamber of a traditional Turkish bath, where tasks of ritual purity and hygiene are undertaken to rejuvenate the soul and the body. This chamber is often star-shaped, with light filtering down through a haze of hot steam from the glass-studded and starred dome evoking the heavens at night. In the centre of this space is a large marble platform, usually octagonal, the *göbek taşı*, or navel stone. The organization of this chamber reiterates the pilgrimage relationship of Muslims to the navel of the Islamic world, the Kaaba in Mecca. And as a reminder to those who doubt that they will ultimately be delivered before God, the flames of the *külhan*, (furnace), are either directly below or beside this chamber: in Turkish the heating system is referred to as *Cehennem*, or Hell (Aykut, forthcoming 2008).





*Karl Girardet after A. de Beaumont, 'Bain de Soliman' (Interior View of Suleymaniye Hamam, Istanbul, b. 1550 -57) mid 19<sup>th</sup> c. French engraving, collection of the author.*

Such elements and relationships were largely absent from Turkish baths in Australia. Turkish baths were adopted in non-Muslim lands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as part of a new understanding and awareness about health and hygiene, not as a religious necessity. Features designed to improve the physical health rather than the soul - such as pools, needle baths and shower hoses - were introduced in the place of domed ceilings and marble navel stones. The application of heat, central to the bathing operations of Turkish baths remained. Heat enabled the body to perspire freely allowing the pores to act as drains, flushing out the body's toxic waste and allowing oxygen to be absorbed in its place. Advocates claimed that this process washed the body from the inside out and this was what made Turkish baths superior to other types of baths.

The system of heating used in Victorian Turkish baths, however, differed dramatically from the Turkish model. Instead of a wet heat or vapour bath found in traditional Turkish baths, Victorian Turkish Baths used a dry heat - and the temperatures of such dry air baths far exceeded those possible in a vapour bath. In dry air baths temperatures could reach 82°C (180°F), while in vapour baths they reached about 40°C

(104°F), only a few degrees hotter than normal body temperature (36° - 37°C). The higher temperatures were believed to have greater curative powers.

In theory, then, this changed the 'parentage' of the baths, showing they were actually closer to Roman antecedents than to Turkish. A Roman link was also made explicit by the use of Roman bath terminology - *apodyterium*, *tepidarium*, *caldarium*, *sudatorium*, etc - to describe the various bathing chambers rather than Turkish descriptors. Victorian 'Turkish baths' were arguably a reinvention of the idea of a Roman bath - partly because ancient Roman baths remained in Britain as a legacy of the Roman occupation, but also because, in the understanding of many, the 'barbarous' Turks contribution to the institution had been merely to keep this practice of the ancients alive. Nevertheless, despite such baths' modifications from the original Turkish model, calling them 'Turkish' prevailed.

Irrespective of the mode of heating, there was no doubting the sense of well-being bathers felt after taking a Turkish bath, although no systematic medical investigations were ever made into the claims of the illnesses or disorders Turkish baths were supposed to improve. This list of ailments was long, as can be seen from the pamphlet James Hosie put out in 1874 promoting one of establishments in Melbourne:

*...Catarrh, or Common Cold, Inflammation of the upper part of the Windpipe and Tonsils, Diphtheria, Sciatica, Rheumatism, Gout, Scrofulous Complaints, Skin Diseases, Nervous Affections, Bilious Complaints, Indigestion, Sleeplessness, Excessive Corpulence, Offensive Breath, Tic Doloieux, Weakness, Chest Complaints, Asthma, Pulmonary Inflammation, Piles (Haemorrhoids), Colic Diarrhoea* (Hosie 1874)

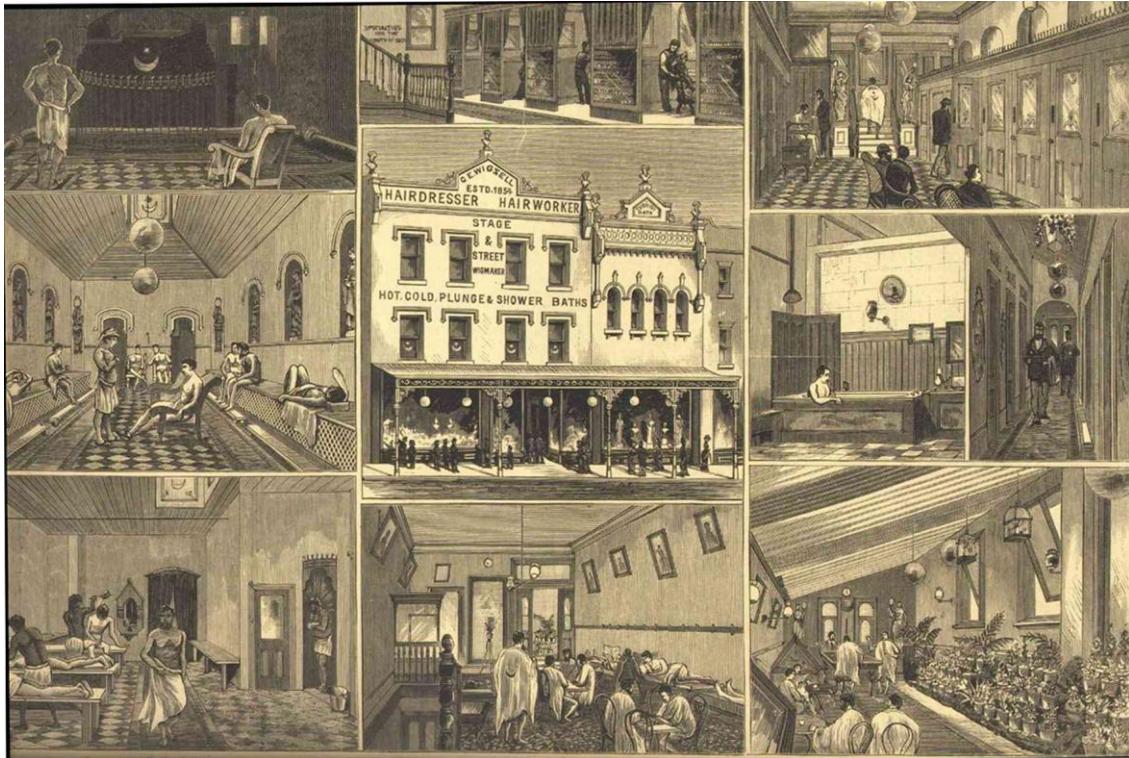
Apart from easing the ills of individuals, Turkish baths were thought to be a boon in the fight to counteract one of the great ills of the period: drunkenness. Consequently they were championed by supporters of temperance movements, who believed that they helped destroy the cravings for strong drinks by offering the working classes an alternative social and recreational venue. David Urquhart claimed he knew of 'no country in ancient or modern times, where habits of drunkenness have co-existed with the bath' (Hosie, 1874). His disciple Dr John Le Gay Brereton, who first brought the bath to Australia, concurred in a public lecture by referring to Gibbon's comment that, had Islam expanded into Europe, instead of 'having gin-palaces, we should have had baths' (Brereton, 1859). While the idea that Turkish baths were an antidote to pubs helped convert skeptics into followers of the bath, there are accounts of Australian Turkish baths sending out for the claret.

Perhaps the most noticeable difference between the 19<sup>th</sup> century Turkish baths in Australia and their Turkish counterparts was their appearance. In Australia, commercial interests generally dictated existing buildings be utilised and adapted, rather than that of the original Turkish models be created. This was the case with Charles Wigzell's Turkish bath in Oxford St, Sydney, where a terrace adjoining his Ornamental hair manufacturing and Hairdressing salon was converted for the purpose.

Even when Turkish baths were separate purpose-built buildings, there appears to have been no desire to create an Orientalist architectural form: rather they were constructed in a variety of European-inspired architectural styles. For, example, the Turkish bath built by Richard Wynne on his property *Wynstay* at Mt Wilson in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales (one of only two private Turkish baths built in Australia known to date) was built in polychrome brickwork to an Italianate design. Its construction sometime in the 1880s appears to have been motivated by tragic family circumstances: it was likely built to alleviate the health problems of Richard Wynne's wife Mary Anne, whom medical advisors had allegedly ordered to have a continuous course of Turkish baths (Lithgow Mercury 1911). Mary Anne nonetheless died of abdominal cancer on 21 July 1889. Mary Anne's illness was not the only one to beset the family, as their surviving child, Henry, suffered from Bright's disease (a terminal kidney



disease) for the relief of which medical opinion of the day likewise recommended the efficacy of Turkish baths. So it is also possible that Richard Wynne built the bath with his son's illness in mind as well (Brereton, 1869). It was used as a bath until 1895, and still stands.



*Wigzell's Hairdressers and Turkish baths, Oxford Street, Sydney Illustrated Sydney News, 29 September 1883. Rare Book Collection, Monash University*

Clearly the promise of 'health' and well-being offered by the Turkish bath had its limitations. But it was a sales pitch that endured and Turkish baths continued to operate in Australia in one guise or another for over a century. Most were far from being exotic. In many ways they were quite a different entity from their Turkish namesake. Yet, providing the core chambers existed to accommodate the necessary mode of bathing 'from the inside out', they qualified as Turkish baths.

To conclude with what was perhaps the quintessential adaptation of the Turkish bath in Australia let me introduce you to Charles Macknight, a squatter in the Western District of Victoria who built the only other known private Turkish bath in Australia. Macknight, a temperance advocate with a preoccupation for personal health and fitness, built a Gothic bluestone Turkish bath (still standing) on his property *Dunmore* in 1866. The following year, on the 7 October 1867, he recorded in his journal that he successfully ran sheep through it which 'effectively killed the ticks at 180° Fahrenheit' (Macknight, 1867).



*The Dunmore Turkish bath (1866), Hawkesdale, Victoria, photo c.1983 Courtesy of Campbell Macknight, great-grandson of Charles Macknight.*

While it is not clear whether or not Macknight regularly ran sheep through his bath, such use of a Turkish bath in animal husbandry was not an isolated example. Some Turkish baths were set up in England specifically for the care of livestock, particularly race horses (Sydney Morning Herald 1863). Closer to home, Edward Ackerman's public Turkish bath in Launceston also offered this service (Ackerman, 1865). Such practices were a far cry from Islamic philosophies designating the bath as a place for reconciling the human body and soul.

### **Susan Aykut**



*Wynstay Turkish bath (1880s), Mt Wilson, New South Wales, photo 29 April 2001: Susan Aykut.*



## Author Attribution

Susan Aykut is Deputy Director of the Institute for Public History at Monash University. Mostly, Dr Aykut researches in the fields of Ottoman history and Orientalist art, but is currently researching the virtually unknown, but intriguing, history of Turkish baths in Australia.

## NOTE

More Turkish baths appeared in the twentieth century, but are not discussed here. A list of all Turkish baths identified to date in Australia can be found at the following website:  
<http://www.victorianturkishbath.org/6DIRECTORY/2WOTSINIT.htm>

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Turkish bath at *Wynstay*, Mount Wilson, NSW  
[\* The door in the middle bay is a later modification that replaced the original stained glass window when the building was no longer operational as a Turkish bath. The original bath entrance was at the eastern end. Of the original eight stained glass and painted windows, six windows have been cleaned and repaired well and the seventh window is, sad to say, incomplete in the central section. At least two of the windows have scenic depictions of Scotland and others feature heron-like birds. Ed.]
2. South Elevation
3. North Elevation
4. Floorplan
5. Section a-a
6. Section b-b
7. East Elevation
8. Wigzell's Hairdressers and Turkish baths, Oxford Street, Sydney Illustrated Sydney News, 29 September 1883. Rare Book Collection, Monash University
9. Karl Girardet after A. de Beaumont, 'Bain de Soliman' (Interior view of Suleymaniye *Hamam*, Istanbul, b. 1550-57), mid 19th c. French engraving, collection of the author.
10. The *Dunmore* Turkish bath (1866), Hawkesdale, Victoria, photo c.1983 Courtesy of Campbell Macknight, great-grandson of Charles Macknight.
11. *Wynstay* Turkish bath (1880s), Mt Wilson, New South Wales, photo 29 April 2001: Susan Aykut.

## REFERENCES

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Brereton, John Le Gay, (1859) "'The Bath, physically and morally considered", delivered at the School of Arts, Pitt Street, 8 November 1859', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 November, 1859.

*Hosie's Turkish Bathing Palace*, (1874) Pamphlet for Hosie's Turkish Bath, Bourke St, Melbourne, collection of State Library of Victoria.

Macknight, Charles Hamilton (1867), *The Dunmore Journal*, Vol. 3 (1 Jan. 1866 - 5 March 1873), State Library of Victoria, MS 8999.

*Sydney Morning Herald* (1863) 'The Turkish Bath for Sheep', 10 January 1863.

Wigzell, Charles E, (c. 1883) Poster for Wigzell's Turkish Bath, Oxford St, Sydney, collection of Woollahra Municipal Library.

The Mount Wilson Historical Society was founded in 1997. In 2001 the Society changed its name to include Mount Irvine, the better to reflect its objectives of recording and preserving the history and heritage of the related communities of Mount Wilson and Mount Irvine.

The occasional guest speakers at the Society's regular meetings always have special knowledge, expertise and interest in a diverse range of subjects related to heritage, broadly interpreted. Whenever possible, with the agreement and assistance of the speakers, the Society produces Occasional Historical Papers to record the talks. This one, by Dr Susan Aykut, is the sixth of such Papers. Her talk was given in May 2005.

Titles in the series are:

1. 'The History of the Mount Wilson Village Hall' (Mary Reynolds), & 'Eccleston du Faur' (Dr Joan Webb), February 2001.
2. 'Some Reminiscences of Political and Legal Luminaries of a Bygone Age in the Mt Wilson/Mt Irvine District' (The Hon. Kenneth Carruthers QC), September 2001.
3. 'Mudgee and Mount Wilson' (John Broadley of the Mudgee District Society), June 2002.
4. 'Elsey Station and the Wallace Connection' (Henric Nicholas) June 2003.
5. 'Prehistory of the Blue Mountains and the Riverlands' (Father Eugene Stockton), April 2005.

The Turkish Bath Museum has been largely funded by the sustained work of volunteer members of the Society, generous donations over the last ten years, along with funds from the State in 1995-1998 and Federal Governments in 2001-02. It is important that it be maintained and continues to be open to the public. Those who do visit are warm in its praise and find the exhibitions of early history of great interest.

The Turkish Bath is currently open 12.30pm to 3:30pm every Sunday in April and May, September and October and the third Sunday in other months. Visits can be arranged outside those times. Tour Groups are welcome.

Editor: Leith Conybeare

With technical assistance from Elizabeth Cranfield