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CONSPIRACY OF DELIGHT

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Abstract
It is something of a miracle to me that at the age of fifty, I should take up all-year-round swimming and grow addicted to the Newcastle Ocean Baths. I’ve learned to know the Baths through limpid blue and the turbulence of king tides. I’ve learned to differentiate between 19 degrees and 15 degrees and have, like my fellow regulars, become disdainful of the fickle summer crowds and secretly long for the water temperature to drop so that we, the true believers, can have the Baths back to ourselves.
(Photo: Marion Giles)
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This is a moody place. The southerly whistles through the sheds and chases us into the churned up pools. A milder wind makes crisp patterns in the water like a child’s drawing of waves. On calm days, the pools are smooth as pale satin and sand-coloured whiting slip through the shallows. I love the small crabs that live in the interstices, the warmth as I swim past the inlets to the ocean, the waves that break at the southern end, sloshing the pool, astonishing me with a sudden drenching.

Early each morning, Peter, the live-in caretaker, hoses down the sheds, the picnic tables, the benches and the asphalt area leading to the pools. He manages at the same time, to ensure that there isn’t a single patch of dryness where any of us can leave our clothes and towels. ‘He should put down that hose and pick up a scrubbing brush,’ says a retired sister from the Royal Newcastle Hospital who doesn’t approve of his profligate hosing or his delight in yarning with the regulars. ‘Look at the grease on the tiles behind the showers.’ She is worked up now and broadens her attack. ‘The caretaker before him used to scrub the sides of the pools every day. None of that green muck around the edges when he was here.’ And it’s true that sometimes the pungent smell of seaweed clings to our skin, but it’s hard to find fault with somebody so heartily in love with his territory. ‘Beautiful, mate! Absolutely beautiful!’ He calls from the pool. ‘I don’t ever remember water as good as this in late April.’

The Baths attract a strange collection of people: muscly swimmers who do their smooth laps up and down, making those of us swimming our awkward breathy lengths envious of their grace and endurance, people from Eastern Europe who have never mastered the crawl and breast-stroke with heads lifted stiffly from the water, women doing complicated aerobics, young men with football injuries who walk up and down, their muscles soothed by the unique sandy bottom of the pool,
a leathery-skinned old woman who dunks herself between sessions of sunbaking and sits at lunchtime, delicately eating her sandwiches and scattering crumbs to the clustering gulls.

Most of the year-round swimmers are middle aged or old. In summer, the pool is transformed with families picnicking, small children with floaties, older ones bombing from the board, scantily clad teenagers showing off to one another. There are swimming classes as well as elementary classes in snorkelling and scuba diving. A surprising variety of fish can be seen in the deeper part of the big pool as well as in the rock pools surrounding the Baths.

On fine winter mornings, the dressing shed is a genial place. 'Oh that was wonderful!' sighs a small woman with an English accent. 'If only they knew what they were missing.' But it's the absence of the they, that makes these cold weather exchanges such a conspiracy of delight. Inhibitions are stripped off with wet swimmers. 'You're lucky you haven't got breasts,' says the woman dressing next to me. I'm compelled then to share with her the agonies I went through as a young woman longing for a full bosom. 'Oh it's all right when you're young and firm,' she says. 'But look how floppy I am now.' An attractive women in her mid fifties describes a man she met yesterday at the Club. 'He's dry. I've never met such a dry man.' Then later on she whispers, 'And he's masterful.' Her voice is as love-sick as a teenager's.

When the weather is cold and sunless, the dressing sheds become grim and almost menacing. One day as I was dressing in one of the cubicles to avoid the strong wind, I heard an argument going on outside. A woman was accusing another of having seduced her husband. The argument grew to such a pitch, I decided it was safer to stay behind the closed door until they went away. When I did emerge, I was relieved to find only one woman still there. But as she began to speak, ignoring my presence, I realised that there had only ever been one person and this woman in front of me, had been playing both parts as skilfully as an actress. Another time, I was alone in the sheds when a young man walked in. Deciding my best defence was attack. I wrapped my towel around me and began to reprimand him, telling him he shouldn't be in the women's shed. He looked at me, wide eyed and chastened and left the place without a word.

A public facility with easy access attracts eccentrics and it's interesting to see the warning sign,

WASHING OF PERSONAL CLOTHING AND OTHER ITEMS IS NOT ALLOWED IN SHOWER OR CHANGE ROOM AREA

I've seen an occasional bag lady bring more than her soap into the shower but the only time I've felt compelled to intervene was when two primary school girls sat
themselves under the shower, began chatting as the water sprayed onto them and seemed determined to continue their watery conversation as long as the heat kept flowing.

Photographers, print-makers, painters have all found the Ocean Baths a compelling subject and a yearly sculpture exhibition is held here. The Baths featured in the film, The Young Einstein, and are a favourite background for advertisements. A girl in an old fashioned one-piece costume, arranges herself on the diving board, while an assistant holds up an anti-glare board and the photographer snap-snaps. Adult baptisms take place here with dark suited onlookers and decently covered postulants awaiting immersion. And there are brides galore. One Saturday, I watched a wedding party pose in front of the blue and cream façade of the Baths. The bride wore her hair in an extravagant style, her veil massed around her, her dress similarly bouffant. She stood with her tuxedoed groom, six bridesmaids and groomsmen, all of them wearing their grand...
clothes and little John Lennon sunglasses. They smiled their matching smiles into the western sun.

Work began on the construction of the Newcastle Ocean Baths in 1913 although the official opening didn’t take place till nine years later. What a mighty undertaking this was by the city fathers and the people of Newcastle were justly proud. The Newcastle Morning Herald (22/11/1922) claimed the new Baths as probably the finest in the Commonwealth. The swimming area is certainly larger than any other enclosed baths in Australia. An article from the Souvenir Civic Week. 1929. explained that the Ocean Baths were cut out of solid rock with cement walls and went on to give a summary of the Baths special features. Reinforced concrete buildings, consisting of administrative offices, dressing pavilion (with lockers and cubicles) for both sexes, lessee’s quarters, cafe and swimming club rooms. Brilliantly illuminated at night and situated at the tramway terminus in the city, these baths enjoy deserved popularity. Thousands of school children attend in classes weekly during the summer months. Sea water is changed daily by powerful electric pumps.

The trams have gone, the pumping system is quite changed and intermittent wild weather has necessitated continuing repairs and modifications. One unexpected change occurred in October. 1953. when entrance to the Baths was made free. But in spite of this bonus, children today aren’t as reliant upon the Baths as the thousands who came in the first eager years. Nor are the mothers, many of whom were given special instruction at the Ocean Baths by Ruby Burns in the fifties and sixties. Suburban municipal pools, private pools and lately the University’s swimming complex, The Forum, have taken over much of the teaching as well as providing more satisfactory venues for swimming carnivals.

The Ocean Baths remain the choice of those of us who prefer the aesthetic and therapeutic advantages of sea-water bathing. And those too who appreciate a link with the past. For all the changes, the two pools are recognizably the same as the ones built in the early years. The dressing sheds are old fashioned with a number of cubicles and several long benches open to the sky, providing an advantage over many modern sheds, by not becoming dank and smelly. Birds make their nests in the corners and it’s not uncommon for us to dress to the low wavering co-roo-coo of pigeons.

Admonitions from the past surround us.

NUDE SUN-BASKING
IN DRESSING SHED
PROHIBITED
PLACE ALL REFUSE
IN BINS PROVIDED

Another repeats the warning.
SUN BASKING IN
DRESSING SHED
PROHIBITED
NO LOITERING IN
DRESSING SHED

What sensual delights are conjured up by *sun-basking* and *loitering*, and I would protest loudly if anyone tried to translate these signs into more modern, less evocative words.

Something else has given me an almost proprietorial interest in the Baths. Ten years ago, I found out almost by accident, that someone very close to me had visited these baths well before I was born. This came as a complete surprise and though I did my best to find out the details of what had happened, I had little success. My curiosity was only appeased, when imagination stepped in to help me establish the Newcastle Ocean Baths as part of my family’s mythology.