

Rotorua Pilgrimage

As written by Gertrude McGowan RSJ - 01.05.1992

These facts have been gathered from the following sources:

- *New Zealand Story 1883 - 1983 (Anne Marie Power RSJ)*
- *The archives at Mary MacKillop Centre, 56 Selwyn Avenue, Mission Bay*
- *The Life of Mother Mary of the Cross (George O'Neill SJ)*
- *A visit around the area with Don Stafford, historian (2-3-91)*

1. We begin our pilgrimage at the north-east corner of Tutanekai and Eruera Streets in front of the Colonial Mutual Buildings. This was the site of Thirwell House, a boarding house kept by a Catholic woman, Mrs Williams, and the place where Mary MacKillop and her sister, Annie, came to stay in March 1902 on Mary's last visit to New Zealand. Her doctor had suggested that the mineral baths at Rotorua could be a possible means of relief for the rheumatic condition that was progressively crippling her.



Boarding costs at Thirwell House were fifteen shillings a week and it is recorded that the Matata sisters, very poor themselves contributed towards the expense.

History Snippet

As it was early recognized that Rotorua would be an important tourist resort the government of the day had the whole township laid out in 1882 with the streets planned and sections divided out for leasing. These leases were to be auctioned in Auckland and in the beginning people from everywhere responded. However, with the Depression of the 1880's and the Tarawera eruption, 1886, many sections did not sell and Ngati - Whakaue were left with them on their hands until 'this century when the idea really bore fruit. Interestingly, too, Rotorua was the third place in New Zealand to have electricity - Reefton, first, then Wellington and as early as 1901, Rotorua - so Mary would have enjoyed the benefit of that.

2. As the streets were laid out in 1902 in the identical location they are now, we can follow Mary's journey to the baths and to St Michael's with some accuracy. Almost certainly she would have walked along Tutanekai Street for a block, then turned right into Hinemoa Street and continued straight along to the baths. She would have passed Brent's Hotel on the right and at that time this consisted of a series of houses linked by a passage. These



rooms were built to offer accommodation close to the hospital and the lake for patients and visitors. In a letter Mary describes the grounds of the bath area as very attractively designed. She would have passed a little cottage still standing there - this was the head gardener's cottage built in 1900. The paths and gardens are now as they were then and there was even an aviary and a zoo. The archways to the entrance were built for the Duchess of York's visit in 1901 and were originally at the junction of Hinemoa and Fenton Streets, arranged diagonally for the royal entourage. She would have walked through these gates. There are several routes Mary could have taken to St Michael's but very likely she would go down Tutanekai Street and along the lakefront to the Church.

3. For the first month, March, Mary took the "Rachel" baths at a moderate temperature and the mud baths for her hands.

Mary obviously found benefit from the waters. On March 16 she wrote:

I feel the baths are doing me good. The rheumatism in my knees is becoming less and I can walk so easily now.... This is such a nice private house. We have had a priest resident here most of the time...

Rachel Baths

The baths were enclosed in special buildings, the Pavilion Baths and the Duchess. The Pavilion Baths, opened in 1882 contained the "Rachel" pool and the "Priest's Bath". The latter was named after Father Mahony of Tauranga who had found relief in the waters there. The mud-baths were located in a lean-to at the rear of the "Priest's Bath". The "Duchess" building was opened by the Duchess of Cornwall in 1901 and this provided private baths and an enclosed swimming pool both supplied with "Rachel" water. The Pavilion Baths were on the spot where the present Polynesian Pools are situated.



4. Then she went to Auckland to spend Easter with the sisters at Middleton Road. As she was feeling so much better the sisters persuaded her to return to Rotorua for another month. This she did, but the doctor who, according to O'Neill, seems to have been "a singularly ill-advised practitioner", encouraged her to take stronger baths. He prescribed the "Priest's" bath which Annie describes as very hot and severe, so much so that Mary would not let her try it even though she was fit and strong at the time. Then he ordered the "Vapour" bath in the original Blue Baths. This was also very hot and trying, even for strong men. These baths were located where the tall trees are now behind the flower garden and received the waters from the Oruawhata Pool at the back of the band rotunda.
5. Finally, she was prescribed the "Postmaster" baths, the most severe of all.

Postmaster Baths

These were situated on the sulphur flats on the lake shore about 1 kilometre along the Old Coach Road from the Pavilion. They were built over the actual springs and the bather rested on the pumice floor through

which the water welled up, accompanied by a considerable amount of gas, principally carbonic acid and sulphuretted hydrogen. Because both the water and the fumes were so potent the baths were built open to the atmosphere. In this area the spring still boils furiously today in lone isolation. Around the area you see the heavily encrusted sulphurous surface of the terrain which had to be traversed on foot so you can imagine how rough the pathway that Mary followed must have been. The name was given to this bath in 1892 by a Post and Telegraph official who pitched his tent beside the spring and bathed in its healing waters. They were opened in 1895 and demolished in 1920.

6. On May 9 she wrote to her friends in Australia and this extract describes her day: Thank God I am wonderfully well, and able to take the strongest baths, which are doing me a great deal of good. I cannot say that the rheumatism is cured, but the symptoms are good, and the doctor thinks the real cure will come later. Anyway, my general health is better than it has been for years... We leave here for Auckland next Friday; there I must spend a week in each convent, making a visitation and enjoying myself at the same time. Then, will, D.V., visit each of our convents down south.....This house is called "The Convent", - never without either sisters, priests, or even the Archbishop. Now we have two Vincentian Fathers - such cheerful and holy men, who are very kind to us, and are almost as devoted to music as Archbishop Redwood himself, and who keep Annie pretty busy at the piano. Finally, I have my bath for the hands, then a long walk to the Postmaster's" hot pool - the strongest of all, but which can be taken with care and safety. Between going to Mass and the two baths and back we must walk quite eight miles a day; fancy that for me and you can judge how much I have improved in strength. Of course, the weather is now cold or we could never do it, and there are no hills to climb." Mary also took catechism classes at St Michael's probably on Sundays.



7. So much for her plans...On Wednesday 11 May, just two days after this letter she followed her programme as usual, but was no feeling well, so cut the length of the baths short. Nevertheless, when she returned to the boarding house, she went off to help the landlady with the preparation of dinner. Annie went upstairs. Shortly she was called to Mary to find she had had a stroke. Mary was very ill for some time but gradually recovered enough to be taken back to Auckland by a special ambulance railway carriage. This had been organized by Bishop Lenihan of Auckland, always her loyal friend. He arranged with the Railways Department for the new invalid carriage that had only become ready for use at the beginning of May 1902, so when Mary travelled on it on Wednesday 21 May she would have been one of the very first



to experience its comfort. She convalesced at the Remuera Convent for the best part of that year, and then returned to Sydney.

8. Such was her interest in the children of Rotorua that in the next year she sent three sisters to open a school where St Michael's now stands. So in 1903 Dorothea, Lorenzo and Padua arrived - the oldest being only 31 - to staff our first school in Rotorua. The present presbytery was not only their home but also a home for student boarders. By 1922 the tiny convent school was proving inadequate for the number of children seeking admission so it was decided to build a new convent and school in Seddon Street. The old school broke up on December 19 1925. A cottage was built for the sisters in Seddon Street and in order to enable them to have a few boarders, the "temporary" presbytery on the grotto site at Ohinemutu was shifted to the new convent and added on. This was familiar to many of us as the "Deanery", named after Dean Lighthouse.

