

William Cullen (1710–90)

The College will be celebrating the tercentenary of William Cullen's birth with a special exhibition this year. It is scarcely possible to exaggerate Cullen's importance in 18th-century medicine, living as he did in what has come to be known as the Scottish Enlightenment. Intellectually, he was a giant among giants. Physically, he was small and unassuming.

The son of a lawyer and factor (estate manager) to the Duke of Hamilton, Cullen was born in Hamilton, Lanarkshire, and went to a local grammar school before attending Glasgow College. He was then apprenticed to a Mr Nisbet, a surgeon-apothecary. Lowly as that position was, Cullen must have seen many patients with what today we would describe as medical and surgical conditions being treated by his master; some being bled, others having minor surgery without anaesthesia and yet others dying of infection, malnutrition, childbirth and trauma. This experience must have stood him in good stead when, aged 19, he became a surgeon on a trading ship plying between London and the West Indies.

In 1731 Cullen returned to Scotland and practised as a doctor a few miles from his birthplace. Had he not inherited a small legacy about two years later he might have spent the rest of his life there. He used the money to come to Edinburgh to study medicine through three winter sessions. Some fellow students and Cullen started a student medical society, which was later granted a Royal Charter by King George III and in 1779 became the Royal Medical Society. Cullen was already making a name for himself.

On qualifying he returned to Hamilton and started a partnership with a man destined to become as famous and influential as himself, William Hunter. It was a measure of their mutual commitment to the



Portrait of William Cullen attributed to William Cochrane. This copy of a painting by Alan Ramsay was presented to the RCPE by Cullen's great grand-daughter.

highest standards of knowledge and care that they planned that each should study in alternate years in different medical schools of their choice. Hunter went to London, and remained there, becoming a world-famous anatomist and surgeon and the owner of his own medical school, one of no less than 26 in London at that time. Cullen left Hamilton in 1744 to work in Glasgow, where his brilliance and versatility were recognised. Soon he was appointed lecturer on the theory and practice of medicine and within six months there was added to this not one but three more subjects – botany, materia medica and chemistry. In 1751 he was appointed Professor of Medicine at Glasgow University.

Four years later, he joined the RCPE and Edinburgh University invited him to be joint Professor of Chemistry with Andrew Plummer, succeeding Plummer when he died a year later, making Cullen sole Professor of Chemistry and Medicine. In those days the Professor of Chemistry taught in the wards of the Royal Infirmary, and Cullen soon acquired an international as well as a national reputation as a clinical teacher.

When the Chair of the Institutes of Medicine became vacant, Cullen was appointed to it and in 1773, on the death of John Gregory, he was elected to the Chair of the Practice of Medicine.

In 1773 Cullen became President of the RCPE at a time when, having recognised that an appropriate building with a hall for meetings and a library for the ever-increasing number of books was urgently needed, plans were being studied and funding sought. Cullen had the pleasure of laying the foundation stone of the new Physicians' Hall in George Street, probably little thinking that within a few years it would be found inadequate for its purpose and too expensive to maintain. Interestingly, Cullen had never been a member of the College Council before becoming President.

Much of his Presidency was taken up with ensuring the highest standards of medical training and raising the status of the College. In these endeavours he owed much to his old partner Hunter, who had to remind him that at that time not all Scottish medical degrees were recognised in England. Cullen also played a major role in producing the 1774 edition of the *Edinburgh pharmacopoeia*, and had the pleasure of seeing his own book, *First lines of the practice of physic*, going through many editions and being translated into French, German and Italian.

His influence was felt and appreciated far beyond Edinburgh. The American Fellows who were to develop the Philadelphia College of Medicine owed much to him, as did Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush.

Cullen continued his university work until the age of 79. He died a year later and was buried at Kirknewton.

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