

Edward Hill

Born: 1741

President: 1782-1783, 1789-1790, 1795-1796, 1801-1802, 1808-1809, 1813-1814

Died: 1830

Towards the end of the eighteenth century Edward Hill was at the centre of a great controversy involving the College of Physicians and Trinity College Dublin. Hill was determined to promote the study of botany, and he argued the need for a world-class herb garden to be essential for the medical school curriculum. He sought support from the College of Physicians and Trinity and requested funds from the Dun's bequest to support this project. However, another Fellow of the College, Robert Perceval (qv), was promoting the need for a purpose-designed clinical teaching hospital. Such hospitals, he argued, were at the centre of progressive European medical teaching and he urged Dublin to do likewise. He also looked to money from the Dun's bequest for his scheme.

The Dun's bequest had long been a *cause-celebre* in Dublin with its interpretation being constantly revisited in the courts and the legislature. The first School of Physic Act 1785 sought clarification but instead left a loophole stating that monies could be used 'for such other purposes as shall be judged most conducive to the success and advancement of medical instruction'. With two worthy causes in dispute the legislature was again dragged into the debate. This time, the decision taken by the Irish Parliament favoured clinical teaching over a world-class herb garden. Hill could not accept this reverse without repost and he vented his ire about the alleged duplicity of his colleagues to both the College of Physicians and to his students. There does seem to be some evidence to support Hill's complaint but with the demise of the Irish parliament in 1800 there was little scope for redress.

Hill was an outstanding student at Trinity College Dublin and graduated BA (1765), MB (1771) and MD (1773). He held the Professorship of Botany and the Regius Professor of Physic. He was at various times Registrar, Censor and Treasurer of the Royal College, Examiner of Apothecaries Shops and was President of the College on six occasions. Even in later life (1819-26) he served the College as Dun's Librarian until the age of 85.

One of his many talents was his penmanship, first recognized by the Board of Trinity. Consequently, he was invited to write the Duke of Bedford's Testimonium for which he was paid the princely sum of five guineas. The College of Physicians has a comprehensive catalogue of all books held in Dun's Library at the time of Hill's involvement, completed in his unique script and style. In 1811, he carried out the first survey of the lands of the Dun's Estate and presented a detailed report to the College. He was also interested in architecture and submitted a drawing based on a Greek temple design in 1814 for the competition to celebrate the Duke of Wellington's



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successes. Another interest, developing from his involvement as an Inspector of Apothecaries Shops, was his participation in the first attempt to produce a Dublin Pharmacopia in 1794.

Overall, Hill was an accomplished scholar, knowledgeable in Greek, Latin, French and Italian. He was a bibliophile and in 1816 he auctioned off his own library consisting of some 1800 volumes. There were eighteen incunabula, over a hundred early sixteenth century Greek, Latin and Hebrew Bibles and French and Italian literature.

He was, from 1773 to 1830, Physician to Mercer's Hospital and attended all board meetings of that establishment, yet it is said of him that he rarely appeared on the wards describing it as 'a dangerous and arduous duty'¹. His greatest consolation in life was the study of the works of John Milton, especially *Paradise Lost*. Speaking of this work he said 'when cheerful and devoid of care I have resorted to them for amusement and instruction and they have contributed often to console me in the hour of sorrow.'² His lifetime's devotion to this study resulted in a new commentary but he was unable to find a publisher.

Hill died in 1830 aged 89 having been predeceased by his wife. Dr Percy Kirkpatrick, Registrar of the College, states 'that while he was a tenacious fighter for his cause and often was unsuccessful, yet he was always open and never stabbed his opponents in the dark.' He also said that 'he had no appetite for secret plotting to attain his ends and would have rather abandoned them altogether rather than attain them by underhand means'.³

Edward Hill's portrait was presented to the College in 1914 by his great granddaughter.

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¹ Quoted in Helen Andrews, 'Edward Hill', *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

² John B Lyons, *The quality of Mercer's: The story of Mercer's Hospital, 1734-1991* (Dublin: Glendale, 1991), 61

³ Thomas Percy Claude Kirkpatrick, *Edward Hill MD, regius professor of medicine in the University of Dublin. A chapter in the history of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland* (Dublin: Ponsonby Press, 1920), 34.

