

William Stephens

Born: 1696
President: 1733-1734, 1742-1743, 1759- June 1760
Died: 1760

William Stephens displayed during his long medical career the extensive intellectual interests of a Boerhaave trained physician. Son of Walter Stephens, his family originally came from Wiltshire but settled in Wexford in the early seventeenth century. Little is known of his early life but he seems to have been brought up at least partly in England as he is described as *Anglo-Hibernus* from Littlecott in Wiltshire when studying at Glasgow in January 1715. In September 1716 Stephens, aged 20 and described now as *Hibernus*, matriculated in Leiden. He appears also to have had some medical training in Dublin as his MD thesis, *De Elixir Proprietatis*, presented under the aegis of Boerhaave in July 1718, is dedicated among others to his teacher, Duncan Cumings (qv) of Dublin.

Stephens then returned to England and was elected a Member of the Royal Society in December 1718. He was back in Dublin by, at latest, the summer of 1720 where he was accepted as a Candidate for admission to Trinity College in January 1721, subsequently graduating MB and MD from Trinity in 1724. In 1723, he was asked by Trinity to take over the management of the new Physic Garden and he lectured on botany to students in the Trinity Medical School. He published a synopsis of his lecture notes on taxonomy entitled *Botanical Elements* in 1727, based heavily on the classification of Joseph Pitton de Tournefort but also incorporating the latest ideas on plant sexuality. Although he styled himself Professor of Botany, it appears he was never formally appointed to the post. His interest in botany lay more in the properties and uses of medicinal plants than in taxonomy and he became a lecturer in chemistry in Trinity in 1732, a post he occupied till his death. He became a Fellow of the College in 1728. He was a founder Member of the Dublin Society in 1731 (now the Royal Dublin Society) and served as the first Secretary, giving a paper on dyeing which displayed his interests in both chemistry and botany suggesting the substitution of plants easily grown in Ireland to replace imported dyes.

By then he was becoming a prominent member of the profession and of Dublin society. The *Dublin Evening Post* for 15 to 19 October 1734 noted that at the end of his 1733 presidency, he gave a 'very elegant entertainment' to the Fellows. In addition, his works entitled the *Botanical Elements* and *Upon the Cure of the Gout by Milk-diet*, were both the subject of satires published in Dublin in 1733.

In 1734, he became a Trustee of the newly established Mercer's Hospital and acted as one of the physicians who provided their services unpaid to the hospital. President again in 1742, Stephens was made a Governor of Dr Steevens' Hospital in 1743 and Visiting Physician in 1750 having



LIVES OF THE PRESIDENTS

already acted in this position for the previous year. His mentorship of the Trinity graduate, Samuel Clossy, inviting him in 1752 to undertake post-mortem dissections in the hospital has been considered critical to the development of Clossy's later career as one of the most famous anatomists of his day. Stephens was also Physician to the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham.

He became President of the College for the last time in October 1759 but from the beginning of 1760 onwards attended only one meeting and died in the following June.

EL



HERITAGE
CENTRE

ROYAL COLLEGE OF
PHYSICIANS OF IRELAND