

Edmund Cullen

Born:	Unknown
President:	1787-1788, 1794-1795, 1799 – 23 Oct 1799 (resigned)
Died:	1804

Edmund Cullen was undoubtedly an important scholar and physician in the late eighteenth century having been elected President of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland three times in 1787, 1794, and 1799. Nothing is known of his family background and early life, but he was taught by a Dr Benson and then entered Trinity College Dublin as a pensioner on 8 July 1767. He became a scholar in 1770 and was awarded a BA degree in the Spring Commencements in 1772. He studied for some time in Scotland, earning his MD degree from the University of Edinburgh in June 1781 after defending his dissertation *De Aere et Imperio ejus in Corpora Humana*. He was appointed Fellow of the College of Physicians in July 1782, and was then awarded MB and MD by Trinity College in the summer of 1793. Cullen was appointed King's Professor of Materia Medica and Pharmacy on 5 April 1786. He was also unanimously elected Physician to the Meath Hospital in February 1786, but resigned later in 1787 after less than two years in post.

Edmund Cullen's fame has been somewhat overshadowed by that of the better-known William Cullen, a Scottish physician and Professor of Medicine and Chemistry. Yet, Edmund Cullen's knowledge of chemistry and pharmacy must have been extensive for he translated Torbern Bergman's *Physical and Chemical Essays (Opuscula physica et chemical)* from the original Latin and to which he added notes and illustrations. It was published in 1784, in two volumes, by John Murray in London and printed by Luke White in Dublin. The translation was reissued in 1788 and a third volume was added and anonymously issued in Edinburgh in 1791. Contemporary reviews of the translation were favourable stressing that, prior to Cullen's version, Bergman's renowned work was only available in French translation to those who could not read in the original Latin.¹ More recently, however, Partington found the translation somewhat 'unsatisfactory', although mainly referring to the anonymous third volume.² Bergman, renowned in his field, was Knight of the Order of Vasa and Professor of Chemistry at Uppsala. The inclusion of Cullen's translation in the Catalogue of the Medical Library of the Pennsylvania Hospital suggests that the book may have reached far-and-wide beyond the borders of Ireland and Britain. It has also been used and cited by modern scholars.

In the translator's preface, Cullen stresses that the significance of Bergman's work and philosophy lies in his use of science 'for the advancement of human happiness' as opposed to

¹ *The Critical Review: or, Annals of Literature*, Vol. 58, Aug 1784, 81.

² James R. Partington, *A history of chemistry*, Vol. 3, (London: Macmillan, 1963), 183.



‘barren and unproductive speculation.’³ Accordingly, Cullen describes his translator’s task as a duty which ‘he owes to the community.’⁴ Additional notes and appendices were necessary, he explains, in order to assist ‘those who are but moderately skilled in the knowledge of the chemical principles and art.’⁵ Thomas Beddoes, himself the translator of another work from Bergman (*A dissertation on Elective Attractions*), appears to have contributed a number of notes. The publisher added an ‘Advertisement’ in which it was noted that another translator, indeed ‘B.’, assisted in superintending the press due to ‘the great distance of the translator.’⁶ There is also a suggestion that Cullen had been obliged to defer some of his work ‘on account of some domestic interruption.’

Cullen lived in 48 Exchequer Street in 1787, and afterwards lived in South King Street where he died in 1804. Elected President of the College of Physicians on three occasions, he resigned the post shortly after he was elected to it for the third time, on 23 October 1799.

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³ Edmund Cullen (trans.), *Physical and Chemical Essays* (London: John Murray, 1784) v-vi.

⁴ Cullen (trans.), *Physical and Chemical Essays*, v-vi

⁵ Cullen (trans.), *Physical and Chemical Essays*, v-vi

⁶ Cullen (trans.), *Physical and Chemical Essays*, ix

