Before Our Time

JAMES PARKINSON

Born April 11, 1755

James Parkinson, whose *Essay on the Shaking Palsy* appeared in 1817, was born in Hoxton, lived all his life there, and was buried at the parish church of St. Leonard's. The term Parkinson's disease is now used throughout the medical world, and the words "Parkinsonism" and "Parkinsonian" have been added to the English language; but Parkinson himself has been "forgotten by the English and by the world at large." [1]

THE FAMILY

His father, John Parkinson, was a surgeon in practice at Hoxton Square, and he was the eldest of three children. His sister Mary Sedgwick (born Jan. 11, 1763) married John Keys, and his brother (born March 5, 1761) died a young man. He married in St. Leonard's Church, on May 12, 1781, Mary Dale, who is believed to have been the daughter of John Dale, a silk manufacturer, who lived in Charles Square, Hoxton. Six children were born of the marriage.[2]

John Parkinson, father of James, became a diplomate of the Company of Surgeons soon after the surgeons separated from the Company of Barber Surgeons, and in 1775–76 he was anatomical warden under the master, or professor of anatomy. He practised at no. 1, Hoxton Square, for many years until his death. A memorial stone is still visible affixed to the wall of the verger's house in the precincts of St. Leonard's Church, Shoreditch, and the inscription "John Parkinson, surgeon, late of this parish, died 10th January, 1784, aged 59," is still readable, though the epitaph below is undecipherable.

No. 1, Hoxton Square, is a corner house, on the south-west corner of the square, and it was still standing in 1910. It had three storeys and a basement, with a two-storeyed building behind it, having an entrance on to the side street, and behind this a single-storeyed room that might have served as a shop.[1] Nothing exists today except the old front railings: the house was demolished many years ago, and a factory now occupies the site. Parkinson in his will refers to the contents of his shop, and it is probable that he kept an open shop for the sale of medicines, which would enable him to charge for those he dispensed himself. The house was never owned by the family though they had occupied it for so many years, the owner being a Joshua Jenning. The whole of the square, which was built in the middle of the 18th century, was owned at one time by Israel Wilkes, father of the notorious John Wilkes.

Charles Square and Hoxton Square were the two best residential areas in Hoxton, and the Parkinson family had as neighbours the vicar of St. Leonard's Church, another surgeon, lawyers, tradesmen, and several distinguished Nonconformist divines. Today the only residents are the vicar of St. Leonard's Church and the clergy of St. Monica's Roman Catholic Church. Nearly all the other buildings are furniture factories. Some of the buildings were destroyed in air-raids, but the ancient trees in the centre still flourish and the garden is well kept. Two other buildings in the square in Parkinson's time were the Hoxton Square Coffee House and a Nonconformist meeting-house.

MEDICAL WRITINGS

James Parkinson had an urge to write, and as an apprentice he boldly challenged theories of Dr. Hugh Smith, the younger, who had published a book entitled *Philosophy of Physic* and another entitled *Philosophical Inquiries* in 1780. A tract on these books, though published anonymously, is attributed to Parkinson.

His father was medical assistant to the Royal Humane Society for the New River area, which meant that he was on call for cases of drowning. A report of the society for 1778 records that an honorary medal was presented to James "for the recovery of the body of Brian Maxey," on Oct 28, 1777.

The report of the case, which was written by John Parkinson, the father, states that he and his son were called to a house in Hoxton, where a man had hanged himself. When they arrived at the house they found him pulseless and to all outward appearances dead, but after carrying out the restorative methods recommended by the society—e.g., inflation and deflation of the lungs, friction, &c.—the pulse returned in half an hour, natural breathing in forty minutes, and in ninety minutes his senses returned. The patient "expressed his sorrow for his horrid crime and the greatest gratitude to those who were instrumental in his restoration to his wife and children."

Parkinson was in good company, for Dr. Hawes and Dr. Cogan, instigators of the Royal Humane Society, and the illustrious Dr. J. C. Lettsom, were medical assistants for the Thames between London Bridge and Westminster Bridge.

The society paid two guineas to those attempting resuscitation for two hours, a guinea to the landlord of the public house used as a receiving house, and half a crown to the messenger. A further two guineas was awarded to the medical assistant if the patient recovered. As most of the medical assistants refused payment, medals were awarded to them instead. The medal, which was silver and had the recipient's name engraved on it, was bequeathed in Parkinson's will to his medical son.

Parkinson had had a sound liberal education at a time when most surgeons are said to have been ill-educated. He had an extensive practice, and he early showed that he was a keen observer with unusual clinical acumen. He wrote many articles for medical journals on cases which he met in his practice as well as those he had been called to see as a medical assistant of the Royal Humane Society.

He described the treatment of a child, aged 14 months, who was found lying face downwards in a tub of water; the attempted resuscitation of a youth who had been drowned, and his experiments with an electrical apparatus on the muscles of the limbs; the treatment of a servant girl of 28 who was suffering from hydrophobia, and who afterwards died in the London Hospital; the treatment of two men who were struck by lightning in a house in Shoreditch, both of whom recovered; and the recovery of a farm labourer who had been blinded by a flash of lightning, while driving cattle in from a field on a stormy night. He described a case of trismus, following a compound fracture of the bones of the leg, in which the patient recovered after treatment with heroic doses of tincture of opium and drastic purgation. In a report in 1812 on the post-mortem examination of a boy of 5, he describes a perforated gangrenous appendix with peritonitis, believed to be the earliest reference to the disease in English medical literature.[3]

He also wrote popular books. Today they would have some such titles as "Home Doctor" or "First Aid for the Sick and Injured." But at the turn of the 18th century they were called *Medical Admonitions for Families* (1799), and the *Villager's Friend and Physician* (1800). A first-aid sheet intended to be hung by the cottager's fireside was called *The Way to Health* (1802). He wrote a book for children *Dangerous Sports* (1800), which pointed out the dangers of childish pranks and rough games.

1. Rowntree, L. G. *Bull. Johns Hopk. Hosp.* 1912, **23**, 33.
2. The first child, James John (born Feb. 11, 1783), died in infancy; the second, John William Keys (born July 11, 1785), was apprenticed to his father and became a surgeon; the third was Emma Rook (born April 5, 1788); the fourth, Jane Dale (born Oct. 2, 1789), died Jan. 21, 1792; the fifth, Henry Williams, was born May 7, 1791, and the sixth Mary Dale, was born March 8, 1794. James, his brother and sister, and all his six children, were baptised in St. Leonard's Church.

   John William Keys Parkinson married Diana Chapple, in St. Leonard's Church, on May 7, 1811, and they had two children, James Keys (born Oct. 29, 1812) and Mary Hester (born March 30, 1816). After his wife's death he married again, and his wife, Elizabeth Caroline, bore him a son, John Ellis (born July 29, 1820).

   Emma Rook Parkinson married John Dymock, of Stonehouse, Gloucestershire, on Oct. 29, 1816, at St. Leonard's Church, and they had four children. The eldest, Emma Parkinson Watts Keys Dymock (born November, 1821, died Aug. 28, 1867) married Edward Brown of Croydon. The youngest, the Rev. Nathaniel Dymock, M.A. Oxfd, died in 1909, aged 82, having been rector of Wymonsfold, Kent, and vicar of St. Paul's Church, Maidstone. The other two children died in their teens.

   Henry Williams Parkinson married Elizabeth Ascutt and left the country to live in Calcutta. Mary Dale Parkinson was unmarried at the time of her father's death.

   It is probable that descendants of John Watts Keys Parkinson and Emily Rook Dymock are living today.
3. Shepherd, J. A. *Lancet*, 1954, ii, 299.

Parkinson suffered from gout, as did his father before him, and in his *Observations on the Nature and Cure of Gout* (1805) he described in detail their symptoms and his own theory as to the origin and pathology of gout. But despite the painful enlargements of the interphalangeal joints of his right index finger, he wrote a bold unwavering hand, as may be seen by one of his letters dated 1812, which is in my possession.

In his tract, *Hints for the Improvement of Trusses* (1802), which sold for only a few pence, he pointed out the danger of strangulation and how necessary it was for those doing heavy labour to wear a truss. A plate was included showing the stages in the construction of the appliance which he had designed for the control of inguinal hernia, which could be constructed by any handy man at a small expense. In the preface he deplored the fact that a surgical appliance—a necessity for the preservation of life—could be patented and thus become "a species of monopoly."

Outside his profession he had many interests. His *Chemical Pocket Book* (1799) reached five editions. His main interest and hobby, however, was geology. He had a collecting instinct which grew with the years, and he collected fossils. His monumental work on palæontology, *Organic Remains of a Former World* (1804–11), consisted of three large volumes with plates engraved from drawings which he himself had made. The cost of these volumes was ten guineas, a large sum in those days, but it must have sold well because there are over twenty copies of it in London libraries alone. This work was reprinted twenty-six years after his death by his friend, Dr. Gideon Mantell, another medical man who became a celebrated geologist.

POLITICAL ADVENTURES

Parkinson lived during the French Revolution and the long war with France. He was a pacifist and a political reformer, and he wrote many pamphlets under the pseudonym "Old Hubert," in which he advocated the reform of representation of the people in the House of Commons, the institution of annual Parliaments, and universal suffrage. He became a prominent member of the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information which had these reforms as their aims.

In 1794 the leaders of the societies were arrested and tried for high treason, but were acquitted. Parkinson was subpœnaed as a witness at the trial of Thomas Hardy, the founder of the London Corresponding Society, but was not called to give evidence.

Shortly before the trials of the leaders, three members of the London Corresponding Society, well known to Parkinson, were arrested and imprisoned without trial, the Government having suspended the Habeas Corpus Act in order to do this. They were accused of plotting the assassination of King George III by means of a poisoned dart. The deed was to be perpetrated from the pit of the theatre while the King was sitting in his box. Parkinson, convinced of the innocence of the accused, wrote to the Privy Council offering to give evidence to prove their innocence. The offer was accepted, and in his pamphlet *Assassination of the King* Parkinson set out from memory the questions he was asked and his replies. The supposed plot was a frame-up, based on false evidence concocted by a Government informer who had been a member of the society, and the prisoners were later freed.

The Privy Council were astonished when Parkinson revealed that he was the author of a pamphlet *Revolution without Bloodshed* (1794). His other pamphlets were bitter, sometimes venomous satires, though often mixed with touching pathos. One, in particular, was addressed to Edmund Burke. In his *Reflections on the French Revolution* Burke referred to the common people as "the swinish multitude." Some 40 tracts were published in reply, including one by Parkinson, *An address to the Hon. Edmund Burke from the Swinish Multitude* (1793), in which he wrote:

"As to yourself, good sir, there are those who contend you resemble the venomous asp, whose poison is placed beneath its tongue, or the Camelon, and like that creature, your appearance ever changes with your situation."

SOCIAL REFORMS

The wretchedness of the labouring poor, the poverty and misery of their homes in Hoxton and Shoreditch, had made Parkinson an ardent social reformer.

He had an unfortunate experience.

He was called to see a widow named Mary Daintree, of Rosoman Street, Clerkenwell, who had been wandering about the street at night, had heard voices coming down the chimney accusing her of having killed her husband, and who had concealed a knife in her dress, presumably with suicidal intent. Parkinson saw her after she had been admitted to a private asylum. As a result of his examination he did not think that she was certifiable; so he made inquiries in neighbouring houses, questioned her nephew and niece Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Elliott, her lodger, and her son aged 16, who said he was convinced that his mother was insane. Parkinson returned to the mad-house, and, as a result of a further examination, signed the certificate for her detention.

After a few weeks she was sitting looking out of the window when she saw a woman friend, to whom she shouted that she was being detained against her will. The friend informed her brother, and other friends, who secured her release. Three years later, Benjamin Elliott was tried at the Clerkenwell sessions house, on an indictment charging him, his wife, and a Sarah Bodkin, with conspiring to deprive Mary Daintree of her liberty. He was found guilty and sentenced to six months' imprisonment.

A storm of criticism of Parkinson's conduct appeared in the daily press. He was accused of certifying Mary Daintree, not as the result of his own observations, but on information supplied by others. Fellows of the Royal College of Physicians, who were visitors in lunacy, expressed surprise that he had not "contradicted the calumnies raised against him." The son, now aged 19, in the witness-box denied that Parkinson had ever questioned him, and Parkinson did not recognise him, though he did afterwards, when it was too late.

In a tract, entitled *Mad-houses. Observations on the Act regulating mad-houses* (1811) he vindicated himself and suggested that two medical certificates ought to be required, instead of one, and that the aid and direction of a justice of the peace was necessary.

In 1819 Parkinson published a tract *Observations on the necessity for Parochial Fever Wards*. He related how in an epidemic of fever among the inhabitants of one of the numerous courts off the Kingsland Road, Shoreditch, they could not obtain the services of hired nurses and neighbours shunned them. He suggested that parochial fever wards should be established, containing 18 beds (6 for men, and 12 for women) for a population of say 50,000 persons. When the epidemic was over the building could be used as an infirmary. Parkinson was visiting physician to the parish infirmary in the Kingsland Road, which was built in 1777, and St. Leonard's Hospital now stands on the site. He deplored the fact that there was only one hospital for pauper fever patients in London, and that its 70 beds were inadequate. It was over fifty years before an Act forced local authorities to provide isolation accommodation for fever cases.

Fully occupied as he must have been with his medical practice, and despite his devotion of his leisure hours to his favourite science, he found time to interest himself in the affairs of the parish of St. Leonard. In 1799 he was elected by his fellow-parishioners a trustee for the liberty of Hoxton, and he remained a member of the vestry until he died.

The committee which managed the Sunday school, held at St. Leonard's Church, appointed him as secretary. In 1807, Mr. Samuel Whitbread, M.P., the brewer, brought a Bill before the House of Commons to establish schools in every parish throughout the country, for the education of poor children, whereby each child should have the opportunity of attending school for two years at the expense of the State. Parkinson wrote a tract *Observa-*

tions on Mr. Whitbread's Plan for the Education of the Poor (1807), in which he said that a debt of gratitude was due to the proposer of the Bill, but he feared that as a result of the establishment of these parochial day schools the Sunday schools would suffer. He maintained "that a mere literary education without the inculcation of moral and religious principles would prove highly injurious." Furthermore, the parents, whose children earned one to three shillings per week up to the age of 14, and five shillings per week after this age, were unlikely to forego this money for the sake of the children's education.

Much concerned with the welfare of the children of the Sunday school, he kept a register containing the names of all children who were seeking employment, with particulars concerning their abilities, behaviour, &c., which was open to inspection by prospective employers, because he felt that the welfare of poor children was greatly influenced by their first situations in employment.

He was also concerned for the welfare of pauper children of the parish, who were apprenticed to masters and mistresses, not in their own parish, but in neighbouring parishes, lest they should become chargeable in adult life. He reflected that no law existed by which the duties of the employer were defined, nor were any inspectors appointed to visit the children to see the conditions under which they worked. He succeeded in persuading the vestry to appoint some of the trustees as voluntary visitors. Later, visitation by paid inspectors was laid down by Act of Parliament.

About this time, Malthus maintained that the earth would not be able to yield enough food to feed the rapidly increasing population. Parkinson thought otherwise, and said "that if the population exceeded the means of support, the fault lay not in nature, but in the ability of politicians to discover some latent defect in the laws respecting the division and appropriation of property."

PARKINSON'S DISEASE

In 1817 he wrote the *Essay on the Shaking Palsy*, which has brought him posthumous fame in the medical world. His description of the disease, which now bears his name, has never been bettered, though it has been expanded. He considered the cause to be principally "in the medulla spinalis of the cervical region, its membranes, or the containing theca," and he hoped that some doctor would one day have the opportunity of examining the body of a patient who had died from the disease—for he modestly apologised for the hypothetical nature of his observations on its pathology. The following extract from the essay is an example of his pleasing literary style.

"The patient experiences much inconvenience, which unhappily is found daily to increase. The submission of the limbs to the direction of the will can hardly ever be obtained in the performance of the most ordinary offices of life. The fingers cannot be disposed of in the proposed directions, and applied with certainty to any proposed point. As time and the disease proceed, difficulties increase; writing can now be hardly at all accomplished, and reading, from the tremulous motion, is accomplished with some difficulty. Whilst at meals the fork, not being duly directed, frequently fails to raise the morsel from the plate; which, when seized, is with much difficulty conveyed to the mouth. At this period the patient seldom experiences a suspension of the agitation of the limbs. Commencing, for instance, in one arm, the wearisome agitation is borne until beyond sufferance, when, by suddenly changing the posture, it is for a time stopped in that limb, to commence, generally, in less than a minute in one of the legs, or in the arm of the other side. Harassed by this tormenting round, the patient has recourse to walking, a mode of exercise to which the sufferers from this malady, are in general partial; owing to their attention being thereby somewhat diverted from their unpleasant feelings, by the care and exertion required to ensure its safe performance."

LAST YEARS

It has been said that Parkinson received no honour for recognising the disease as a clinical entity, nor for his work on palæontology. True, he was given no honorary degree, nor was he elected to the fellowship of the Royal Society; but he did receive recognition from the Royal College of Surgeons of England, whose honorary gold medal was awarded him in 1822. He was, indeed, the first to receive this award (instituted twenty years before), and it has been bestowed only fifteen times in the past hundred and fifty years, the recipients including Lord Lister, Sir James Paget, and Richard Owen.

It seems clear, too, that Parkinson was held in high esteem by his fellow general practitioners, for in 1818 he was chairman of the Association of Apothecaries and Surgeon Apothecaries of England and Wales. He was also a member of many learned medical and geological societies. He was one of eleven people who met at the Freemason's Tavern, Great Queen Street, in 1807, and founded the Geological Society of London, and he was on the council from 1813 to 1815. He was a member of the Wernerian Society of Edinburgh and the Cæsarean Society of Moscow. He was a fellow of the Medical Society of London, and a member of the London Medical and Chirurgical Society.

Parkinson is believed to have retired when he exchanged houses with his son, who continued the family practice in Hoxton Square. He died on Dec. 21, 1824, at no. 3, Pleasant Row, Hoxton, and an entry in the burials register of St. Leonard's Church reads: "No. 741. James Parkinson, Kingsland Road, buried December 29th 1824, R. Crosby." His remains were interred in the graveyard attached to the church, but no tombstone can now be found.

No portrait of Parkinson is known to exist, and the only description we have of him is by his friend Mantell who wrote: "Mr. Parkinson was rather below middle stature, with an energetic, intelligent, and pleasing expression of countenance, and of mild and courteous manners; readily imparting information either on his favourite science or on professional subjects."

Parkinson was truly a general medical practitioner; and his impact on his own generation and his influence on succeeding generations is shown by the number of his ideas, both social and scientific, that are now generally accepted.

My thanks are due to Dr. W. McMenemey, Dr. J. Dymock, and Mr. Jackson, borough librarian at Shoreditch for their assistance in obtaining biographical details.

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Points of View

HOLES, KNOBS, AND WIRES

Abstract Art and Auto-suggestion

Sir HENRY TURNER, C.B.E.

THE public is in these days learning in some degree to tolerate persons who act abnormally. We try to persuade ourselves that they are sometimes, in effect, being pushed from behind, and not just "bloody-minded." And I think that we ought to use this charitable approach in considering why artists—many of them possessing unquestionably skilful technique—produce what are at first sight (and often later) meaningless doodles; lumps of stone pierced by quite unsuggestive holes, tangles of wire, and so forth.

So, with a layman's proper timidity I shall attempt an answer to the questions—"Why is abstract art produced, and why is it taken seriously by people seemingly well qualified to appraise it?"

* * *

In the first place I would suggest this experiment. Take three (or more) upholsterer's coiled springs, entangle them, and mount the result in an inverted aquarium bowl indirectly lit, with a professionally