James Parkinson (1755–1824)

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James Parkinson, so well known in medicine for the shaking palsy he described, was better known in his own lifetime as a political agitator and a geologist [1–4]. Regrettably no painting or drawing of him is known to exist. He was born on 11 April 1755 in East London, the son of the apothecary and surgeon John Parkinson (1725–1784), who practised at the house. John was distinguished as Anatomical Warden of the Surgeons' Company, the professional body that superseded the Barber's Company in 1745 and itself was succeeded in 1800 by the Royal College of Surgeons. James was baptised in nearby St Leonard's Church, where in due course he was to marry Mary Dale with whom later he had six children and to become Churchwarden; eventually he was buried there.

In 1776 James was admitted as a dressing pupil at the London Hospital in Mile End Road for six months. His name appeared on the list of examined and approved surgeons of the Corporation of London. In three years after its foundation in 1774, the Royal Humane Society awarded James its prestigious Silver Medal after he had resuscitated Brian Maxley. In 1780 he published *Observations on Doctor Hugh Smith's Philosophy of Physic* and discussed the role of vital air in the blood.

His interest in politics became manifest during the years 1793–1795, when, under the pseudonym 'Old Hubert', he published political pamphlets each costing one penny or more and campaigning for reform. The titles of his 12 publications were *The London Corresponding Society United for the Reform of Parliamentary Representation*, *Assassination of the King*, *The Budget of the People*, *The*

Village Association, *Knave's Acre Association*, *An address to Hon. Edmund Burke from the swinish multitude*, *Pearls Cast Before Swine* by Edmund Burke scraped together by Old Hubert, *Revolutions without Bloodshed*, *Mast and Acorns*, *Whilst the honest poor are wanting bread*, *An account of some peculiar manners and customs of the people of Bull-land* and *The Soldier's Tale*. James' transition from politician and political-pamphleteer occurred sometime after 1795, possibly influenced by the death of Edmund Burke (1729–1797) or, more likely, after James' inquisition by William Pitt the Younger (1759–1806).

James wrote popular medical texts before these became more popular in Victorian times. In 1799 he wrote *Medical Admonitions addressed to families respecting the practice of domestic medicine and the prescription of health* that ran to two editions in that year, and in 1800 he commented on medical education in his book *The Hospital pupil or an essay intended to facilitate the study of medicine and surgery*.

In 1802 both *The Way to Health* and *Hints for the improvement of trusses* appeared, and in 1804 *The Village's Friend and Physician*. In 1807 he published both *Observations on the excessive indulgence of children* and further polemic in his book *Observations on Mr Whitbread's plans for the re-education of the poor*. Perhaps he might be regarded as an early paediatrician for in 1808 he added *Dangerous Sports, a tale addressed to children*.

James was much influenced by the surgical lectures of John Hunter (1728–1793), surgeon-general to the Army, who possessed one of the largest collections of fossils in the country, and it may have been he who triggered James' deep interest in geology; many other religious persons at that time believed the answer to the understanding of God's Creation lay in the study of prior forms of life. After James died in 1824, his son John transcribed his shorthand lecture

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notes which were published in 1833 as *Hunterian Reminiscences*.

The first evidence that James might be interested in these natural phenomena occurred in 1799 with his publication *The Chemical Pocket Book*, followed in 1804, 1808 and 1811 by the three volumes of *Organic Remains of a Former World*, which for many years remained the chief work of authority on fossils. James was one of the 13 founding members of the Geological Society in 1807 and he published papers in its *Transactions*. He travelled widely but only within England, it seems, and he corresponded with other collectors.

James suffered from gout and described his own disorder in 1805 in *Observations on the nature and cure of gout* [5]. He saw patients in the Hoxton madhouses, publishing in 1811 *Mad-houses, observations on the act for regulating mad-houses* and, as a result of an unfortunate event when he committed a patient to care on the say-so of a nephew, it became obligatory for two doctors rather than one to certify madness. James had promulgated this idea in his 1800 book entitled *The Hospital Pupil*. He wrote medical papers with his son, John, and they described the first case of ruptured appendix in the English language in their 1812 paper *Perforation of an Inflamed Vermiform Appendix*. James' most famous work, *An Essay on the Shaking Palsy*, appeared in 1817 and was based on his observations on six sufferers, not all of whom were his patients, he had observed at close quarters. In 1877 Jean Martin Charcot (1825–1893) in his *Lectures on Diseases of the Nervous System* renamed the disorder *Maladie de Parkinson*. James commented on the need for isolation in patients with fever and smallpox in his 1819 pamphlet *Observations on the Necessity for Parochial Fever Wards*.

James' geological interests reached their height in 1822 with the publication of his last work on the subject, entitled *Outlines of Oryctology; or, an introduction to the study of*

fossil organic remains. Two years later, in 1824 and with his son John, James wrote his last paper—on typhoid fever—and they advocated plenty of fresh air and sanitation for this dangerous and prevalent disease.

James moved to 3 Pleasant Row nearby and it was there on 21 December 1824 that he died two days after sudden aphasia and right-sided paralysis. His burial place at St Leonard's Church is not marked, but he may well rest in the crypt where a stone records that his son, John, was buried there; James' father's tombstone is mounted on the outside wall. It is possible to trace the lineage of this family to the present day.

What was it then about this man whose name is so well known to us that led to his polymath interests and was he unusual in this? He was probably not unusual in that many other doctors, clergymen and (other) gentlemen were interested in natural phenomena. Natural philosophy, or science as we now term it, was beginning to unfold with the tools available at the time, just as many of our own ideas about disease depend extensively upon the precise methods we have at our disposal at any given time.

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