



Who Was James Parkinson?

by Peter G. Beidler

Parkinson's disease has long been known by the name of an eighteenth-century British medical doctor named James Parkinson. He did not have, nor did he discover a cure for, the nasty disease that bears his name. Who was James Parkinson and how did "his" disease come to be named for him?

James Parkinson was born in 1755 in the town of Hoxton just north of London. Not long after he got his medical degree, his father, also a doctor, died unexpectedly, and James took over his father's medical practice. He worked as a practicing physician all his life.

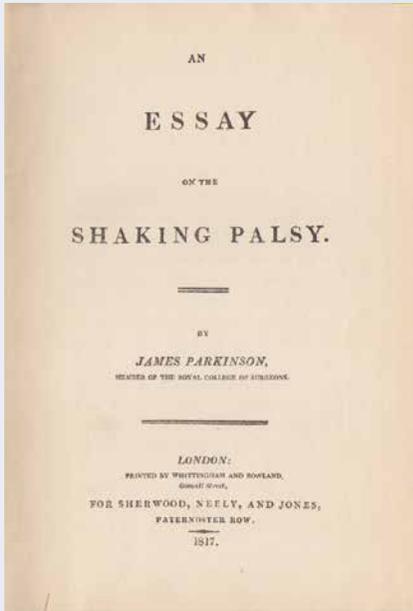
James Parkinson was well-known in his own time, but not for his pioneering work on the disease that bears his name. He was best known for disseminating medical information and for his geological work. In a time when only the rich could afford to consult medical doctors, James Parkinson worked hard to make basic information about medical care available to anyone who could read. He gained fame as the author of a large number of medical articles, pamphlets, and books. He wrote about topics like the care and feeding of children, how to recognize and treat rabies and epilepsy, how to treat intestinal worms, the nutritional importance of breast-feeding, the dangers of quack medicines, the health benefits of personal hygiene, and the value of inoculation in preventing smallpox.

James Parkinson's medical advice was brought together in 1799 in his medical magnum opus, a two-volume encyclopedia with this imposing title: *Medical Admonitions Addressed to Families; Directions for the treatment of the sick on the first*

appearance of the disease; by which its progress may be stopped, and a fatal termination prevented from taking place, through NEGLIGENCE OR IMPROPER INTERFERENCE. This family encyclopedia made widely accessible the most up-to-date information about sanitation, prevention of diseases, and treatments for common illnesses. Due to its comprehensive, detailed, and easy-to-understand discussion of a wide range of diseases and medical conditions, Parkinson's Medical Admonitions found its way into many British and American households.

James Parkinson's fame for his medical writings was soon eclipsed by his fame as a collector and interpreter of fossils. One of Europe's earliest paleontologists, James Parkinson helped to establish the first geological society and was an early leader in the new science. He spent his most productive years writing about the history of the earth, the geological strata of England, and the principles of oryctology (the study of fossils). His monumental, illustrated, three-volume *Organic Remains of a Former World* (published between 1804 and 1811), was at the time viewed as his most important and influential work. No one—certainly not Parkinson himself—could have predicted that two centuries after his death he would be remembered not for these large accomplishments but for a much narrower one.

James Parkinson was a busy and energetic man. He worked full days as a physician and apothecary, traveling out almost every day to visit sick patients in their homes and almshouses. Most nights, he read widely and wrote voluminously. Perhaps what



Perhaps what was most distinctive about James Parkinson was his ability to observe carefully and to draw fresh inferences from what he observed.

was most distinctive about James Parkinson was his ability to observe carefully and to draw fresh inferences from what he observed. His work on what he called the shaking palsy originated not in observing his own patients but in noticing the strangely tortured movements of three elderly men, strangers to him and to each other, as they moved awkwardly through the crowded streets of Hoxton. He noticed that they walked hunched over, leaning forward as they shuffled and stumbled along the busy streets. He introduced himself to each of them and asked them a series of questions.

How long had they had that arm tremor? Did their arm shake like that when they were sleeping? What had triggered the condition? When had they started speaking with such difficulty—so softly and indistinctly? Was it painful to walk hunched forward like that? Did the tremors

hurt? What other symptoms did they complain of? Slowness? Stiffness? Drooling? Did anyone else in their families share these symptoms? Were symptoms better or worse if they drank a pint or two of beer? Did anything—fresh air, certain medicines, certain foods, certain kinds of exercise—improve or worsen their symptoms? Did they ever feel constipated? Why did they not step down heel-first as other men did? Why did their arms not swing as they walked? Did they fall often? Did they ever

contemplate ending their own lives?

Through careful observation, asking questions, and paying close attention to the answers of those three men, and later three more men who exhibited a similar range of symptoms, James Parkinson was able to draw amazingly accurate profiles of the people who suffered from the shaking palsy. Other medical people had noticed patients with some of the symptoms that James Parkinson described, but treated them as isolated symptoms and individual medical phenomena. James Parkinson's genius lay in his hunch that these and other symptoms might exemplify progressive stages of the same slow-moving disease.

In 1817, when he was sixty-two, James Parkinson published a substantial pamphlet that he called *An Essay on the Shaking Palsy*. He was surely aware of the inadequacy of the term "shaking palsy" since he knew that the tremors were not always present in the six men he observed, and he knew that as the disease progressed many other symptoms presented themselves.

James Parkinson never attached his name to the disease. In 1872, nearly a half-century after his death, a French neurologist named Jean-Martin Charcot found and read the essay and understood its importance. He referred to the disease as *le malie de Parkinson*, and the name stuck.

James Parkinson never found a cure for the disease that bears his name. By observing, asking lots of questions, and listening carefully to the answers, he showed subsequent medical researchers more precisely the nature of the disease that required their attention—and that still does.

*Note: My main sources for this article were Cherry Lewis, *The Enlightened Mr. Parkinson* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2017), and Dr. James Parkinson, *An Essay on the Shaking Palsy* (1817).*



Pete Beidler Pete Beidler was diagnosed in 2006, about the time he retired after teaching English for forty years at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. Pete's new book *Living and Dying with Parkinson's Disease* will be published in May 2020. He and his wife Anne live in Seattle.