Before Our Time

JAMES PARKINSON
Born April 11, 1755

James Parkinson, whose Essay on the Shaking Palsy appeared in 1817, was born in Hoxton, and 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.”

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.

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 1755–76 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 indecipherable.

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 single-storeyed building behind it, having an entrance on to the side street, and behind this a single-storeyed room that might have been used as a shop. 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 had been 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 the 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 1775 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 observation lifeless. They were called in after enquiring what the case was. They did not attempt resuscitation in case 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 a sound liberal education at a time when most surgeons are said to have been ill-educated. He had an extensive mind, but after death he was pointed out as 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 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.

He also wrote popular books. Today they would have 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 (1860), which pointed out the dangers of childish pranks and rough games.

2. The first child, James John (born Feb. 11, 1783), died in infancy;
   the second, William Keys Parkinson (born July 11, 1785), was apprenticed to his father and became a surgeon; the third, Emma Rook Parkinson, 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.
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 interphalan-geal joints of his right hand, he wrote a bold, unwavering, undated 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 cure 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 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 sub- poenaed 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 her innocence. The offer was accepted, and he prepared his report 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."

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 understanding heart.

He was called to see a woman 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 the woman the next day. The official 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. The official was acquitted and sentenced to 14 years' 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. Fellow 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 recall him.

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 library 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 Observ-
persuading the vestry to appoint some of the trustees children of the parish, who were apprenticed to masters because he felt that the welfare of poor children was 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.

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 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 brain 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 subsmission of the limbs to the direction of the will can hardly ever be obtained in the performance of the most ordinary offices of life; he 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 experiences much inconvenience, which unhappily is found daily to increase."

The patient experiences much inconvenience, which unhappily is found daily to increase. The subsmission of the limbs to the direction of the will can hardly ever be obtained in the performance of the most ordinary offices of life; he 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 experiences much inconvenience, which unhappily is found daily to increase.

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...