

James Parkinson, famous for his account of paralysis agitans, should also be known for his having given the first description of appendicitis in English (in 1812); he recognized that perforation of the appendix was the cause of death in his patient. The reason for his limited fame is made clear by certain aspects of his life.

Little is known about Parkinson's early life except that he was born in 1755, the son of a physician and a member of a family of broad culture and extensive education. But for the publication of his *Essay on Shaking Palsy* his name would probably not have survived in the annals of medicine despite his writings on clinical medicine, on medical education, and on domestic medicine. His many activities often subordinated his interest in medicine. For example, his studies in geology and in paleontology early in the nineteenth century established his reputation as a pioneer in a field that was at the beginning of a period of explosive development. His paleontological publications constitute a lasting contribution to the subject, ranking with those of Owen and Huxley.

During his lifetime, James Parkinson was perhaps best known in England as either a political reformer, a dangerous radical, or a madman, depending on the opinions of different people. Social reform was one of his main interests and the ideas that underlay both the American and the French Revolutions strongly attracted him. He wrote a number of tracts on political reform and belonged to several secret political societies. He included among his aims making good medicine available to the poor. His writings and political activities caused him to become the object of distrust by many of his contemporaries and, at least for a time, an object of suspicion on the part of the British government. It is hard to say whether he was primarily paleontologist, social reformer, or physician, although it is clear that medicine was his profession.

Despite his extremely busy life he found time to define the syndrome that bears his name. His powers of observation and description are evident; it is also clear from his references to previous authors that he was a great and honorable scholar. Galen, Sylvius de la Boë, Juncker, Cullen, and Sau-

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vages were all listed as his forerunners in his account of the condition. The descriptions of the onset and earliest phases of the disease comprise some of the most precise and subtle clinical descriptions in all of medicine. He wrote: "So slight and nearly imperceptible are the first inroads of this malady, and so extremely slow is its progress, that it rarely happens, that the patient can form any recollection of the precise period of its commencement. The first symptoms perceived are a slight sense of weakness, with a proneness to trembling in some particular part; sometimes in the head, but most commonly in one of the hands and arms. These symptoms gradually increase in the part first affected; and at an uncertain period, but seldom in less than twelve months or more, the morbid influence is felt in some other part. Thus assuming one of the hands and arms to be first attacked, the other, at this period becomes similarly affected. After a few months the patient is found to be less strict than usual in preserving an upright posture: this being most observable whilst walking, but sometimes whilst sitting or standing. Sometime after the appearance of this symptom, and during its slow increase, one of the legs is discovered slightly to tremble, and is also found to suffer fatigue sooner than the leg of the other side: and in a few months this limb becomes agitated by similar tremblings, and suffers a similar loss of power.

"Hitherto the patient will have experienced but little inconvenience; and befriended by the strong influence of habitual endurance, would perhaps seldom think of his being the subject

of disease, except when reminded of it by the unsteadiness of his hand, whilst writing or employing himself in any nicer kind of manipulation. But as the disease proceeds, similar employments are accomplished with considerable difficulty, the hand failing to answer with exactness to the dictates of the will. Walking becomes a task which [cannot] be performed without considerable attention. The legs are not raised to that height, or with that promptitude which the will directs, so that the utmost care is necessary to prevent frequent falls.

"At this period the patient experiences much inconvenience, which unhappily is found daily to increase. 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 his 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."

An equally graphic and detailed account of the progression of the symptoms follows. The remarkable thing about these descriptions is that they were based on a study of only six patients; they obviously were observed frequently and carefully.

Parkinson's many textbooks and other works in medicine, chemistry, geology and paleontology, and also his political and social tracts are all but forgotten today. His outstanding abilities as observer and teacher are likewise rarely recalled. Only the fact that he applied his remarkable powers to the description of a previously unrecognized syndrome made him immortal.