

# abstract

JAMES

PARKINSON

–AN EVENTFUL LIFE

AT THE AGE OF 16, JAMES PARKINSON (1755-1824) was apprenticed to his father in London to learn the art and mystery of being an apothecary. During the 1790s, he became heavily involved in radical politics, joining several societies founded to campaign for the reform of parliament. Under the pseudonym of 'Old Hubert', Parkinson wrote many political pamphlets that ridiculed and harangued a corrupt and incompetent government for the soaring cost of food and high taxes, incurred as a result of the war with France.

In the course of these activities, Parkinson became caught up in the 'Pop Gun Plot', as it became known, which allegedly planned to kill the king while he was in the theatre. These false accusations resulted in a wave of arrests of many of Parkinson's friends accused of high treason – for which they could be hung drawn and quartered. On learning of the arrests, Parkinson immediately offered to testify before the Privy Council on behalf of his friends, hoping to show them the ludicrous nature of the charges. In the prevailing political climate, he must have realised that he ran a serious risk of being implicated in the plot, and that he could be putting his life in real danger.

Parkinson had an excellent knowledge of chemistry and recognised the importance of it to both the medical practitioner and the fossilist, writing a classic textbook on the subject. He also wrote many medical works aimed at the general public, helping them assess in times of sickness, whether or not to call in the physician. With these same principles in mind of 'improving' the general public, Parkinson published his three-volume work on fossils: **Organic Remains of a Former World (1804, 1808 and 1811)**. This masterpiece was to put palaeontology on the scientific map of Britain for the first time.

Having become interested in fossils as a young man, Parkinson had tried to find publications in English that would help him understand their significance, but little was available at the time. Assuming that others must be having similar difficulties, he decided to write the definitive book himself. *Organic Remains* was aimed at a popular readership and written accordingly, nevertheless, the work reveals a man fully

conversant with contemporary geological ideas being propounded on the Continent which were, in general, in advance of those in Britain. In 1807, his expertise as the country's only 'fossilist' resulted in him becoming one of the founders of the Geological Society.

In 1817, he published the work for which he is best remembered today and which resulted in the disease he identified bearing his name. His essay on the Shaking Palsy, now called Parkinson's disease, has deservedly become a medical classic, but it was for his work on natural history that the Royal College of Surgeons awarded him their first gold medal. However, his political radicalism barred him from becoming a Fellow of the Royal Society, despite his scientific achievements being far greater than any others who were elected FRS.

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