

BOOK REVIEW

The Enlightened Mr. Parkinson: The Pioneering Life of a Forgotten English Surgeon *by Cherry Lewis*

Hardback, 304 pages
Icon Books
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This book marks the bicentenary of the publication of James Parkinson's "Essay on the Shaking Palsy" – the first comprehensive description of what later became known as Parkinson's Disease. Parkinson was an important polymath in the Age of Enlightenment and in this book, Cherry Lewis, a geologist turned historian, sets out to locate his life story in the context of the time and place in which he lived.

Although there are several biographies of Parkinson, which focus on his contribution to neuroscience, this book adds interesting new details particularly in relation to Parkinson's risky campaigning for parliamentary reform, his concern with social issues of the time, and his work as a pioneering palaeontologist.

Lewis starts by setting the historical scene in London's Shoreditch, a semi-rural suburb just north of the City of London where Parkinson lived all his life. She describes many aspects of Parkinson's education and professional practice as a surgeon-apothecary including his connections with luminaries such as John Hunter, Edward Jenner and George Mann Burrows. The author shows how Parkinson was an "early adopter". He was a pioneer of vaccination in his parish, he won an award for the cardiopulmonary resuscitation of a hanged man, and he started the first fever ward in a workhouse infirmary. He was also an early member of some important political, professional and academic organisations, including the London Corresponding Society, the Associated Apothecaries and Surgeon-Apothecaries, the Medical and Chirurgical Society of London (later the Royal Society of Medicine) and the Geological Society.

Lewis' review of Parkinson's publications is admirable. She covers his radical political essays, written under a pseudonym, his educational books and pamphlets aimed at a lay audience, and his medical works. The latter cover subjects as varied as the design of trusses, the management of gout, the regulation of madhouses and of course his famous essay of 1817, describing the main features of Parkinson's disease. Not surprisingly, in view of her background as a geologist, the author is most impressive when discussing Parkinson's contribution to early palaeontology and the chemistry of fossils.

The Enlightened Mr. Parkinson is both readable and scholarly. It is to be recommended to anyone interested in the medical history of the long eighteenth century.

Chris Derrett
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