Parkes, Joseph (1796–1865), election agent and reformer, was born on 22 January 1796 in Warwick, the fourth son of John Parkes, worsted manufacturer, and his wife, Sarah. His brother was Josiah *Parkes, the agricultural and civil engineer. Parkes was brought up in the traditions of moderate dissent. His father, a trustee of the Unitarian church in Warwick High Street, was well connected in local whig circles and on intimate terms with Basil Montagu and Dr Samuel Parr, the latitudinarian clergyman, who enjoyed a mutual friendship with the family minister William Field. Parr took 'a great interest' in the young Parkes, and 'directed his studies, and recommended a course to which he rigidly adhered' (GM, 645). After attending Warwick grammar school, Parkes followed his elder brother Josiah to the college at Greenwich run by Parr's former pupil Dr Charles Burney. Like many of the whigs who served as his early models, he completed his education in Scotland, at the University of Glasgow, where he entered the logic class of George Jardine in 1811. There is no record of his graduation. In 1817, after a spell in the office of a Warwick solicitor, he moved to London where, during the course of a five-year clerkship with Messrs Amory and Coles of 25 Throgmorton Street, he was introduced by a fellow Unitarian to Jeremy Bentham, with whom he established an affectionate and lasting correspondence. He also met George Grote, James Mill, and Francis Place, whom he later wrote of as his 'political father', from 'whom I early (a raw miseducated boy) learned much sound and honest' (BL, Add. MS 35150, fol. 99).

Supplementing his income through parliamentary reporting, Parkes was destined for the bar, but following the collapse of the family business he moved to Birmingham in 1822 and established a solicitor's practice specializing in election work. He soon secured employment as clerk on the committee of inquiry into the borough of Camelford, Cornwall. At the general election of 1826 he served as an agent to William Evans, a whig candidate at Leicester, and in December 1826 he was 'principal agent'
to Richard Spooner, a Birmingham banker, who stood as a
tory in the Stafford by-election. Thereafter he was regu-
larly engaged on the whig interest in the counties of Wor-
cester and Warwick, and at Stamford in Lincolnshire (Parl.
papers, 1835, 8.92, 110). Carlyle later recalled how, on one
of his Warwickshire visits, he met Parkes, 'then a small
Birmingham attorney', who was 'a rather pleasant talk-
ing, shrewd enough little fellow, with bad teeth, and a
knowing lightly satirical way' (Carlyle, 302). On 2 June
1824 Parkes married Elizabeth Rayner, eldest daughter of
Joseph Priestley of Cradley, Staffordshire, and grand-
daughter of Dr Joseph Priestley, the theologian and chem-
ist, who had taken his family to America; they had two
children.

Parkes was a familiar figure in Birmingham politics,
advising its improvement commission in 1827-8, cam-
paigning on a series of articles and pamphlets, urging the necessity of
local legal reforms. A regular contributor to the Benthamite
diary of 1827 to 1833. In 1828 he published a History of the
Court of Chancery, which was described by Henry
Brougham, who was later Lord chancellor, as 'one of the
ablest and most instructive books published of late years'.
(Hansard 2, 18, 1828, 243-4). He played a leading role in
assisting Charles Tennyson in his abortive attempt to
enfranchise Birmingham between 1827 and 1829, and was
extremely active in the movement for parliamentary
reform from 1830 to 1832, writing frequent articles in the
national press and providing 'an important link of con-
nection between the steady-going Whigs and the swifter-
going Radicals' (The Times, 12 Aug 1830). He condemned the
formation of the Birmingham Political Union as 'ill-
contrived and worse timed', referring to it as 'a burning
law of hot radicalism devastating the fair appearance of the
field of reform' and suspecting Thomas Attwood, its
founder, of trying to promote his currency reform
schemes (Parkes to Tennyson, 2 Feb 1830. Tennyson D'Eyncour-
t Court MS H/53/2). Having failed to prevent its formation,
however, he willingly proffered his professional services
and helped to moderate its activities. When, in November
1831, at the height of the reform crisis, Attwood proposed re-
organizing the union on a semi-military basis, it was
Parkes who, fearing that the bill might be jeopardized,
acted as the Grey ministry's unofficial intermediary,
meeting Lord Althorp in secret at his London home and
persuading the union leaders to back down.

Thereafter Parkes, who assured the radical George
Grote that he was 'not flattered by, but honoured with
unsought letters from Lord Althorp and Lord John Rus-
sell', was consulted by the whigs on various technical
aspects of the bill, including the proposed qualifications
for the borough franchise (BL, Add. MS 35149, fols. 177-19).
He was vociferous in campaigning for peerage creations
in early 1832, and in emphasizing the threat of violent re-
volution during the days of May, when he briefly joined the
union. After the passage of the Reform Act he considered standing for election, either in Birmingham or in the new
constituency of Dudley, where he 'could have cut in for life
and no expence' (Parkes to Tennyson, 30 March 1832. Ten-
nynson D'Eyncourt MS TdE H/31/20). Without an indepen-
dent income, however, he was forced to resume his work as
'an obscure country attorney', as he informed E. J. Little-
ton, 'sunk in the low and to me disgusting occupation of a
country lawyer's office' (Parkes to Littleton, 2 Jan 1833,
Hatheron MSS).

Parkes played a prominent part in the closely related
movement for municipal reform. His experience of con-
tests at Stafford and Leicester had made him acutely
aware of the elective influence possessed by the closed
 corporations. Adopting the methods used by reforming
lawyers like John Campbell and Charles Flint, in December
1836 he successfully initiated legal proceedings against the corporation of Warwick, which led to a case in the
court of chancery and the reconstitution of its charter.
The following year, in a historical account of the Warwick
charter dedicated to Brougham, Parkes called for a com-
plete overhaul of the entire municipal system. During a
brief jill in politics in February 1832, he met Lord Mel-
bourne and discussed proposals for 'a general and well
considered reform of our Municipal institutions', begin-
ing with the establishment of a royal commission
(Parkes to Tennyson, 15 Feb 1832. Tennyson D'Eyncourt
MS TdE H/53/48). He was appointed by Brougham as its
secretary on 18 July 1833, and moved his family to 21 Great
George Street, Westminster, where he set up an office for
himself and the twenty itinerant commissioners on the
ground floor. Following the presentation of their report to
the Commons in April 1835, Parkes assisted in the passage
of the Municipal Corporations Act, helping to draft many of
its clauses, working with Brougham to counter the ultra-
tory opposition led by Lord Lyndhurst in the Lords and,
after the original bill had become compromised, try-
ing to dampen radical misgivings. 'Far from perfect as the
Corporation Act was', he pointed out to Place, 'and
reduced as was its original degree of perfection, yet it has
done or rather will in its effects do the business' (BL, Add. MS
35150, fols. 99-101). His Tory critics included Benjamin Dis-
raeli, Lyndhurst's young protégé, who dubbed him 'Pin-
aller Parkes' in a series of savage attacks in the Morning
Post (Thomas, 283). Parkes, who received £1650 for his
work, continued to assist Brougham on the related Char-
ity Commission, revived in October 1835, and in drawing
up the new municipal boundaries, before leading the
campaign to have Birmingham incorporated in 1837-8.

Parkes later claimed that 'the circumstances of 1832 and
my relation to the Corporation Commission' had given
him 'a wider insight into and connection with the Liberal
Party of the Country than any man living' (Parkes to Dur-
ham, 21 July 1835, Lambton MSS), and he was to prove of
great use to the whig party managers at general elections,
although his advice was sometimes considered too
advanced; even Edward Ellice was forced to ask 'has he a
care for all his vigor?' (Ellice to Durham, 30 Aug 1836,
Lambton MSS). He was constantly pushing for new and
more permanent forms of central and constituency
organization, to be active between elections, and was a
founder member of the Westminster Reform Club, established on 7 March 1834 as a radical alternative to the Whig meeting place at Brook's. As both advocate and agent, he was acutely aware of the need to 'register Reformers' and 'oppose foul registered Tories' in the new registration courts where, contrary to the spirit of the Reform Act, annual legal contests to enfranchise supporters and disfranchise opponents had begun to develop (Parkes to Durham, 18 Jan 1835, Lambton MSS). Appalled at the lack of preparation by the 'lazy supine Whigs' in the unexpected election of 1835, he and Lord Durham, with whom he became increasingly aligned, were instrumental in persuading Ellice to establish a national Reform Association, to stimulate and systematize liberal registration activity in the constituencies (Parkes to Durham, 23 Oct 1835, Lambton MSS). It was officially founded on 21 May 1835, and Parkes became its driving force, personally overseeing the dramatic revision of October 1835, regularly advising Melbourne on Liberal electoral prospects, and keeping the association's paid secretary, James Coppel, 'up to scratch' (Parkes to Stanley, 9 Oct 1836, Parkes MSS). Six months later Parkes, an unceasing proponent of greater Whig radical unity, initiated a scheme to establish a new 'Liberal Union Club', which the Whig party managers were effectively forced to accept and adopt at a meeting held at his house on 5 February 1836 (Parkes to Brougham, 12 Feb 1836, Brougham MSS). The Reform Club, as it became known, officially opened on 24 May 1836.

Thereafter, although Parkes remained active in Liberal electioneering and election petition work, he became increasingly disillusioned with the Melbourne ministry, especially its cautious approach to registration, for which he complained there was a 'great want' of 'funds' (Parkes to Durham, 19 July 1836, Lambton MSS). He strongly criticized the whigs' opposition to further electoral reform, without which he warned that 'the representative system' would 'pass annually more and more into the hands of the Tories' (Parkes to Stanley, 3 Aug 1837, Parkes MSS). Liberal losses in the 1837 general election deepened his despondency, which turned to despair following Lord John Russell's final speech of November 1837, and he was drawn into sympathetic support for the emerging extra-parliamentary movements of the period. After flirting briefly with the Chartists, whose aims he admired but whose methods he abhorred, he gave the full benefit of his electoral expertise to the Anti-Corn Law League of Richard Cobden, who thought him 'one of the cleverest men I have ever met' (Morley, 1.149). He was a leading architect of their national registration campaign, which was to prove so effective against the Conservatives in the 1840s. In 1847, after ill health forced him to cease legal and political work, the whigs rewarded him with the salaried post of a taxying master in chancery.

Like many of the philosophic radicals with whom he is often associated, Parkes retired to scholarly and literary pursuits. His memoir of Sir Philip Francis, whom he believed to be the author of the Letters of Junius, was completed and published posthumously by Herman Merivale in 1867. The bulk of his writing, however, remains in the form of anonymous political pamphlets and leaders, particularly in the Morning Chronicle, The Times, and Birmingham Journal, of which he was co-proprietor from 1832 to 1844. He was an assiduous and highly entertaining correspondent, whose frank and fruity letters to leading whigs and radicals have survived in telling quantity. A lifelong admirer of the legal and political system of America, the birthplace of his wife, he was 'by relationship and otherwise' in regular communication with many of its eminent public men (Parl. papers, 1835, 8.267-8). His close literary friends included George Eliot, whose Felix Holt, the Radical (which fictionalized an election campaign) was completed shortly after his death. His daughter, Elizabeth Rayner (Bessie) Parkes, herself a prominent writer and campaigner on social and woman's issues, was the mother of Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953).

Parkes never achieved his 'sole political object' which, as he once explained to Durham, was 'to gain enough of pecuniary independence to go into the House of Commons free from all personal temptation and place', but he played an important role in the reforming movements and electoral developments of the early nineteenth century (Parkes to Durham, 1 May 1836, Lambton MSS). Perhaps no man, commented The Times, 'was better acquainted than he with the secret history of politics during the last thirty of forty years' (12 Aug 1865). He shifted, as the occasion took him, between the stance of a dissenting Whig and a demagogic radical, but he was never entirely comfortable in either camp. 'Although I am a Radical', he declared, and 'may be a Republican in the year 1900, if by the grace of God I so long live—I am a great advocate for the respect of caste and order' (Parkes to Tennyson, 24 May 1831, Tennyson D'Eyncourt MS D113/1). He died at his home, 17 Wimpole Street, in London on 11 August 1865, allegedly after contracting a chill while travelling to Warwick to register his vote, and was buried on 17 August at Kensal Green cemetery. He was survived by his wife.

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