

Art in the asylum

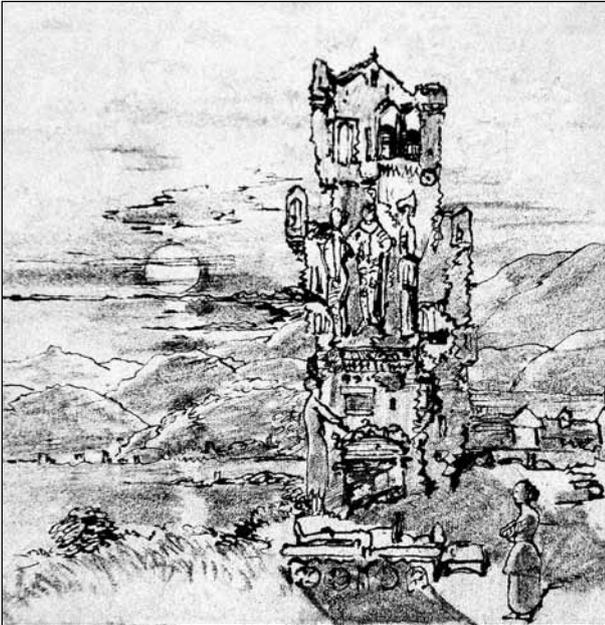


FIGURE 1 William James Blacklock (1816–1858). Landscape with tower and bridge. Pen and ink with pencil shading, 16.6 x 8.7. Dated on reverse: 'Dec 1855'. Attentive viewers will spot figures making up parts of the ruined tower.

Art in the Asylum, the autumn 2013 exhibition at Nottingham University's Djanogly Art Gallery, featured two small drawings (Panoramic Landscape and Caricature Figure) from our College's collection. The works were made by the English landscape painter William James Blacklock (1816–1858).

William Blacklock was brought up in Cumberland. After attending the Carlisle Academy of Art he moved to London in 1836 where he had a successful career as a painter. In 1850 Blacklock's health and eyesight were deteriorating, and he moved back to Cumwhitton where he worked until his youngest brother Thomas had him admitted to the Crichton Royal Institution near Dumfries, suffering from an illness described as 'monomania of ambition and general paralysis'. The two drawings reproduced here were done while Thomas was a patient at the Crichton Royal Institution where he died in 1858.

The drawings came to the College from Thomas Laycock FRCPE (1812–1876) whose manuscript collection was recently catalogued as part of a Wellcome funded archive project. Laycock (whose portrait hangs in the Great Hall of the College) was the professor of the practice of physic at the University of Edinburgh from 1855–1876. In 1855 Edinburgh University professors were appointed by the Edinburgh Town Council and



FIGURE 2 William James Blacklock (1816–1858). Caricature figure. Pen and ink with pencil writing, 8 x 3.6. This small sketch may well show Dr WAF Browne and it does bear some resemblance to his photograph.

Laycock's successful application for the post was unexpected. In 1995 Dr Mike Barfoot wrote a book detailing the twists and turns of this bitter appointment battle which makes good use of the material in the RCPE archive.¹ Throughout Thomas Laycock's career he worked for a better understanding of mental diseases and he is regarded as one of the founders of physiological psychology and neuropsychiatry.

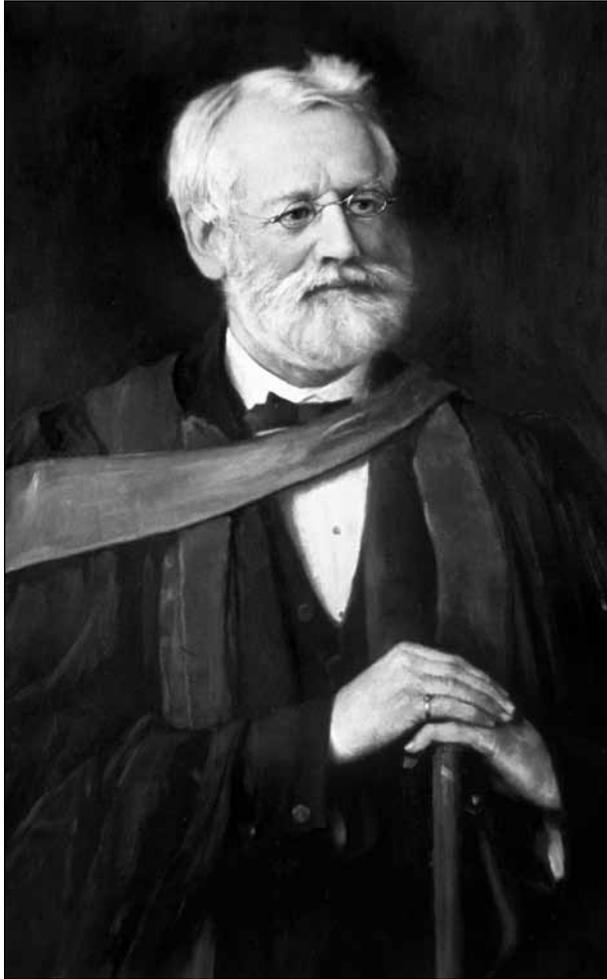


FIGURE 3 Professor Thomas Laycock FRCPE (1812–1876).

In 1875 Laycock published an article, 'A Chapter on Some Organic Laws of Personal and Ancestral Memory' in the *Journal of Mental Science*: in it he used Blacklock's case to illustrate some of his views of the nervous system.²

As an illustration of reversion from the high culture of manhood to boyish art and hand-writing, with erethism of a kinetic art-substrata, I give examples of the hand writing, drawing, and art-composition of an artist who died of general paralysis. The patient was under the care of my valued friend, Dr. W. A. F. Browne, who several years ago favoured me with the originals. The case is very specially interesting, as showing that in general paralysis (so-called) the motor substrata of the hand may be wholly unaffected by palsy; there is not even the tremor observed so commonly in that disease. The hands being thus free to execute, we have a transcript of the organic ideational changes going on in the hemispheres, as manifested by the correlative reflex motor impulses, even when the disease was advancing to utter incoherence.

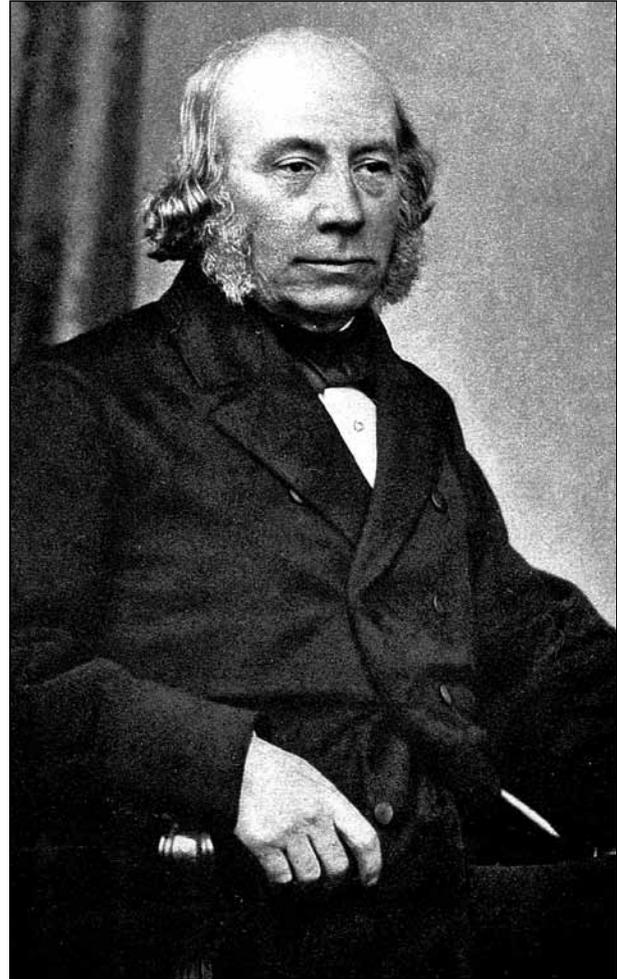


FIGURE 4 Dr WAF Browne (1805–1885).

Dr William Browne (1805–1885), the superintendent of the Crichton Royal Institution from 1838–1857 who gave Laycock the Blacklock drawings was another mental health pioneer. Dr Browne was Scotland's first commissioner in lunacy. He combined asylum visits with lecturing and delivered Laycock's class on medical psychology and mental diseases in 1866 when Laycock was ill.

References

- 1 Barfoot M. "To ask the suffrages of the patrons": Thomas Laycock and the Edinburgh Chair of Medicine, 1855. *Med Hist Suppl* 1995; 15:i–xv; 1–226.
- 2 Laycock T. A chapter on some organic laws of personal and ancestral memory. *Journal of Mental Science* 1875; 21:155–87.