A mong medical historians, Thomas Laycock (1812–1876) is best known for his determinative influence on the young Hughlings Jackson. Laycock’s interests were the nervous system and psychology.

Laycock was the son of a Wesleyan minister. In Bedale, a pretty Yorkshire village just one mile off the Great North road (A1), he trained as an apprentice surgeon-apothecary. He attended the University College, London, furthering his training in Paris for two years, under Alfred Armand Velpeau (1795–1867) and the pathologist, Pierre Louis (1787–1872) an initiator of statistics. In Göttingen, he received his doctorate degree, summa cum laude. He returned to the York County Hospital, receiving preferment as lecturer at York Medical School and physician to the York Dispensary.

In 1852 Laycock encountered Hughlings Jackson, a new student; he also taught Jonathan Hutchinson whom Jackson was to follow Robert Wyntt, and Marshall Hall, Laycock emphasised that the nervous system must be seen as one continuous series of structures obeying one law, that of the reflex.

He extended the studies of Johann August Unzer (1727–1799) and Jirí Procháska (1749–1820), which he translated. Unzer’s book Erste Gründe einer Physiologie der eigentlichen tierischen Natur tierischer Körper was a system of physiological metaphysics introducing reflex action, afferent or “external sensory impression” and efferent or “internal impression” paths, but wrongly localised the central part of the reflex. Procháska termed the central mechanism of the reflex the sensorium commune lying in the spinal root ganglia and peripheralplexuses. Laycock stated:

“The brain, although the organ of consciousness, was subject to the laws of reflex action and in this respect it did not differ from other ganglia of the nervous system.”

He concluded that the entire nervous system was the seat of reflex function in which the mind played no part. This revolutionary idea was later supported by the experiments of Sechenov and were the foundation for the work of Pavlov, Ferrier, and Sherrington. Laycock’s role in such a fundamental aspect of the history of the study of mind and brain has perhaps been neglected. In 1855, Laycock became Professor of Medicine in Edinburgh. There he met David Ferrier and orientated him towards neurology. Laycock published Mind and Brain in 1860, containing one volume on philosophy, one on physiology.

Thomas Laycock (1812–1876)

References
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10 Laycock T. Trans and ed. The principles of physiology, by John Augustus Unzer; and a dissertation on the functions of the nervous system, by George Prochaska. London: Printed for the Sydenham society, 1851.