Dictionary of National Biography: Entry for Thelwall, John (1764–1834), political reformer and lecturer, was born on 27 July 1764 at Chandos Street, Covent Garden, the son of Joseph Thelwall (1731–1772), a silk mercer. He was a sickly child, suffering from asthma and a tendency to stammer. After his father's death his mother continued the silk business, and in 1777 John left his boarding-school at Highgate to work for the family firm. He found this irksome, and preferred to continue his education by self-tuition through wide reading, for which he was frequently reproached by his mother. Personal dissatisfaction and uncongenial family life (his elder brother drank heavily, and may have been mentally ill) was reflected in his restless and short-lived attempts to find a career. John tried to become a painter, then made a fruitless attempt to ‘get upon the stage’. He was apprenticed to a master tailor, but quickly abandoned the trade to make a further attempt to study as a painter. In 1782 he was articled as clerk to the attorney John Impey of Inner Temple Lane. Once again, however, he found himself more attracted to a literary life than to the duties required of him by the legal profession. After three and a half years studying for the bar, his articles were cancelled and in 1786 he ‘launched into the world as a literary adventurer’ (J. Thelwall, xviii). He had already published in journals during the early 1780s. In 1787 his *Poems on Various Subjects* appeared to some praise from the *Critical Review*, and he also became editor and principal contributor to the *Biographical and Imperial Magazine*. With other journalism, and some private tuition, he managed to support himself and his mother (whose silk business had by now failed).

Thelwall began his career as a political lecturer by speaking at public debating societies, especially the Society for Free Debate, which met in Coachmakers' Hall. All shades of political opinion were canvassed at debates: Thelwall was at first ‘decidedly ministerial’ in his sympathies, but the early progress of the French Revolution encouraged a more critical and reformist attitude to the establishment. In 1790 he was a poll clerk at the Westminster election, and in this capacity met and impressed the veteran reformist John Horne Tooke, whom Thelwall subsequently regarded as his ‘intellectual and political father’ (C. B. Thelwall, 76). On his birthday, 27 July 1791, he married Susan Vellum, whom he had met in 1789, while convalescing in Rutland. He settled with her near Guy's and St Thomas's hospitals. Here he attended the anatomical lectures given by Henry Cline (whom he had known since 1787), William Babington, and others. At this time he was a close friend of the surgeon and republican Astley Cooper. Between October 1791 and 1793 he was a ‘most conspicuous’ member of the Physical Society at Guy's Hospital, a distinguished group that met for lectures on and discussion of advanced medical and scientific issues. On

26 January 1793 he presented to the society a lecture entitled ‘Animal vitality’, which speculated on the vital principle of life, and ‘controverted’ John Hunter's theory that this principle was inherent in the blood. The lecture was a great success: it was discussed at five subsequent meetings of the Physical Society, and published as *An Essay towards a Definition of Animal Vitality* (1793).

From 1792 Thelwall had divided his time between scientific interests and his commitment to the rapidly expanding movement for parliamentary reform. When in November 1792 government agents closed the Society for Free Debate, Thelwall resolved to ‘assert and vindicate’ the right to political discussion (C. B. Thelwall, 98). He offered a reward in hope of finding a room for debate and, from November 1793, commenced his political lectures at Compton Street and subsequently at the large meeting-room at Beaufort Buildings, Strand. His central place in metropolitan reformist circles is suggested by his affiliations with various reformist groups. He attended the Society of the Friends of the Liberty of the Press and joined the moderate Friends of the People at Southwark. He was acquainted with members of the long-established Society for Constitutional Information, and in October 1793 Joseph Gerrald introduced him to the more broadly based, working-class reform movement in the London Corresponding Society , founded in January 1792 by the shoemaker Thomas Hardy. ‘Citizen’ Thelwall quickly became the most prominent and articulate member of the reform movement, calling in his speeches for universal suffrage and an end to the war with France. His witty, upbeat presence as a public speaker is evoked by his ‘libel of the Bantum Cock’, which (implicitly) compared George III to a cock on a farmyard dunghill. The radical publisher Daniel Isaac Eaton was charged with seditious libel for publishing Thelwall's satire in *Politics for the People*, but he was acquitted and the prosecution ridiculed for glossing Thelwall's remarks about the cock with the phrase ‘meaning our lord the king’. Thelwall claimed that audiences of 750 people attended his lectures, but his outspoken opinions and his popularity also brought the attentions of government agents and informers (including James Walsh, who in August 1797 would spy on Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth at Nether Stowey). Thelwall could be self-dramatizing and given to exaggeration, but he responded to a genuine threat of violence when he decided to make his hat ‘cudgel proof’, and deliberately walked down the middle of the street to avoid attack.

In the belief that the London Corresponding Society was about to call a general convention (similar to the French revolutionary administration), the British government arrested the leaders of the reform movement. On hearing of Thomas

Hardy's arrest, on 12 May 1794, Thelwall observed to a friend: ‘Affairs are at a sad crisis, citizen’ (C. B. Thelwall, 153). The following day Thelwall was arrested at Beaufort Buildings; his papers and books were confiscated, and he was imprisoned in the Tower of London. He remained in the Tower over the summer months until, on 6 October, he was indicted with the others on a capital charge of treason and moved to the ‘Common Charnel House’ of Newgate gaol (J. Thelwall, xxviii). After the trials of Hardy and Horne Tooke, Thelwall was tried at the Old Bailey from 1 to 5 December and—like his two friends—acquitted. This outcome ‘electrified’ the court room, and brought loud applause from the crowd gathered outside. The charges against the other reformists were dropped, and the prisoners were released.

While Thelwall emerged as a hero of the reform movement, he also continued his literary career. In 1793 he published *The Peripatetic*, a ‘political-sentimental’ compendium of prose and verse that he later claimed was Wordsworth's pattern for his dramatic poem *The Excursion* (1814). During his imprisonment in 1794, he wrote the verses published in *Poems Written in Close Confinement* (1795). After a brief respite following his trial, Thelwall resumed his political activities and published his lectures in his own journal, *The Tribune* (1795–6). His prolific output of pamphlets included *The Natural and Constitutional Rights of Britons* (1795), *Peaceful Discussion* (1795), *The Rights of Nature* (1796), and *Sober reflections on the seditious and inflammatory letter of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke to a noble lord* (1796). Although in 1795 he had retired from the London Corresponding Society, he maintained his support for the society's principles and, on 26 October and 12 November 1795, spoke at the mass meetings called by the society in Copenhagen Fields, Islington. His stature as a leader of the reformists is suggested by James Gillray's satirical cartoon of him in ‘Copenhagen House’, and by Edmund Burke's wry observation that the mass gatherings of reformists constituted ‘the Thelwall festival’.

On 29 October 1795 the king's carriage was attacked at the opening of parliament, an incident used by the government as a pretext for the introduction of the ‘two bills’ or ‘Gagging Acts’. The Seditious Meetings' Bill, passed into law on 18 December 1795, suppressed public meetings and effectively prevented Thelwall's lectures at Beaufort Buildings. Undeterred, and at considerable personal risk, he continued his political career under the guise of lectures on classical history. During 1796 he made a lecture tour of East Anglia, speaking at Norwich, Yarmouth, Wisbech, and King's Lynn. He was nearly captured by a press-gang at Yarmouth, and was ‘successively attacked’ on other occasions when he tried to speak. ‘Such was the conclusion of [my] political career’, Thelwall wrote in 1801 (J. Thelwall, xxx).

Like Thelwall in London, Coleridge had delivered numerous political lectures at Bristol during 1795. The two had corresponded since April 1796, and in the summer of 1797 Thelwall's walking tour through the west country of England brought him to Nether Stowey, where he arrived on 17 July. For ten days Thelwall, Coleridge, and William and Dorothy Wordsworth (recently settled at Alfoxden House) formed a 'most philosophical party' walking in the Quantock coombes. They read Wordsworth's play *The Borderers* in Alfoxden Park, and enjoyed a high-spirited dinner at which an informer, the servant Thomas Jones, was also present. The conversation was reported and, within a few days, Thelwall's old adversary James Walsh—Coleridge's 'Spy Nosy'—arrived at Stowey, only to find that Thelwall had already left.

Thelwall, impressed by Coleridge's and Wordsworth's life of literary retirement, hoped to settle at Stowey too. But, like the poets, he had not forgotten politics entirely: in Coleridge's well-known anecdote, Thelwall claimed that the Quantocks was 'a place to make a man forget that there is any necessity for treason!' (S. T. Coleridge, *Table Talk*, 1, 24 July 1830, 181). Seemingly embarrassed by Thelwall's notoriety, and anxious to consolidate his friendship with the Wordsworths, Coleridge put him off. Thelwall eventually settled with his family at a farm in Llys-wen, on the banks of the River Wye, near Brecon. Here the one-time champion of the reform movement commenced a life of farming and literary composition, describing himself as the 'new Recluse'.

In 1801 Thelwall published his *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement*. 'To the Infant Hampden' and 'Lines Written at Bridgwater' deserve comparison with Coleridge's blank verse 'conversation poems' of the later 1790s. After failing as a farmer, he resumed his lecturing career in November 1801, speaking now about elocution and the 'Science of human speech'. At Edinburgh in 1804 he responded to critical remarks by Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* by opening a pamphlet war with his *Letter to Francis Jeffrey on Certain Calumnies and Misrepresentations in the 'Edinburgh Review'*. Soon afterwards he settled at Bedford Place, where he taught speech therapy and elocution, and in 1809 he established an institute in Lincoln's Inn Fields, where he continued to practise as an elocutionist. His *Letter to Henry Cline* (1810) alluded to his early friendship with the surgeon, to 'treasured remembrances of anatomical and physiological facts', and outlined his system and some successful cases he had treated. In seeking the 'enfranchisement of fettered organs' through speech therapy, Thelwall merged the scientific and political ideals

that had formed two aspects of his career in the 1790s; as he wrote in his *Letter to Henry Cline*, ‘the medical man and the philanthropist will not be insensible to the value of this new science’.

In 1816 his first wife, Susan, died, leaving him four children to support, the eldest of whom was Algernon Sydney Thelwall . His Institute of Elocution flourished until 1818, when, following the end of the Napoleonic wars, the call for a parliamentary reform movement had revived. Thelwall returned to the cause, purchasing and editing a journal, *The Champion*, in which he published a series of powerful denunciations of the Peterloo massacre (16 August 1819). He married, about 1819, Henrietta Cecil Boyle and reopened his elocution school at Brixton. From now on Thelwall resumed his career as an itinerant lecturer, appearing at literary and philosophical societies throughout the country. His subjects included ‘elocution, history, the classics, polite literature, impediments of speech &c.’ (Britton, 1.185); a representative course, dated 16 August 1832, comprised ten ‘Lectures, Elocutionary & Critical, on Milton in Particular, & the English Poets in General’. On 25 January 1834 Thelwall wrote cheerfully from Bristol, saying he was ‘as animate as ever’ on the platform. He also mentioned, however, an ‘unpleasant symptom of the chest’, that he was ‘less & less able to bear the exertion of walking’, and that he still endured his ‘astmha [*sic*], or whatever it is’. Three weeks later, on 17 February 1834, Thelwall died at Bath. His second wife survived him.

Coleridge's sense that ‘Citizen John Thelwell had something good about him’ (24 July 1830, *Table Talk*, 1.180) was echoed in other nineteenth-century memoirs. Thelwall's reputation was enhanced from the 1960s by the work of E. P. Thompson, and the bicentenary in 1994 of his trial for treason occasioned widespread interest in his political, scientific, literary, and medical careers.

Nicholas Roe

Sources

Public characters of 1800–1801 (1801), 177–93 · J. Thelwall, ‘Memoir’, *Poems written in retirement* (1801) · J. Britton, *The autobiography of John Britton*, 1 (privately printed, London, 1850), 180–86 · Mrs Thelwall, *The life of John Thelwall* (1837) · C. Cestre, *John Thelwall* (1906) · E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (1963) · E. P. Thompson, ‘Disenchantment or default? A lay sermon’, *Power and consciousness*, ed. C. C. O'Brien and W. D. Vanech (1969) · D. Rockey, ‘John Thelwall and the origins of British speech therapy’, *Medical History*, 23 (1979), 156–75 · A. Goodwin, *The friends of liberty: the English democratic movement in the age of the French Revolution* (1979) · P. J. Corfield and C. Evans, ‘John Thelwall in Wales: new documentary evidence’, *BIHR*, 59 (1986),

231–9 · N. Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: the radical years* (1988) · N. Roe, ‘Coleridge and John Thelwall: the road to Nether Stowey’, *The Coleridge connection*, ed. R. Gravil and M. Lefebure (1990) · N. Roe, *The politics of nature: Wordsworth and some contemporaries* (1992) · N. Roe, ‘Coleridge and John Thelwall: medical science, politics and poetry’, *The Coleridge Bulletin*, new ser., 3 (spring 1994), 1–23 · E. P. Thompson, ‘Hunting the Jacobin fox’, *Past and Present*, 142 (1994), 94–140 · S. T. Coleridge, *Table-talk*, ed. C. Woodring, 2 vols. (1990)

Archives

NL Scot., letters to Robert Anderson

Likenesses

H. Richter, stipple, pubd 1794, NPG · J. Gillray, portrait, 1795 (*Copenhagen House*), BM · attrib. J. Hazlitt, oils, *c.*1800–1805, NPG [*see illus.*] · stipple, BM; repro. in J. Baxter, *A new and impartial history of England* [1796]