INTRODUCTION: THE CHARACTER AND REPUTATION OF AN 'ACQUITTED FELON'

Steve Poole

> This tragical plot has turn'd out a mere farce,
> And th'alarmists we fairly outwitted;
> 'If we are', cries the amanuensis of Mars,
> 'Still your friends are but felons acquitted'.
>
> 'Epigram on the "Acquitted Felons"',
> *Cabinet of Curiosities* (London, 1795), p. 62.

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Reintroducing himself to public life during a boisterous election meeting for Westminster in 1819, John Thelwall offered his audience a quick word of explanation for his twenty-year absence from the reform struggle. Weary of government-inspired attempts to 'hunt him down like a wild beast', and doubtful about his own effectiveness in the cause of reform, he had withdrawn into the arms of his family. Yet, now, here he stood once again, unchanged, uncorrupted and re-energized. How would he have them remember him? Simply, he said. And when he died, a memorial stone might record his contribution for posterity: 'Here lies John Thelwall, whose moral and political character was never impeached'.[1]

As ill-luck would have it however, Thelwall died quietly on a lecture tour at Bath in 1834. His funeral was not noticed in either the national or local press, and for seven months no memorial marked his last resting place. His widow and a few friends in London tried unsuccessfully to raise a subscription for a 'handsome mural monument', but finally settled for a 'temporary' marker of local stone. Its inscription is a good deal less simple than the one Thelwall had in mind in 1819, but no less evasive in its commemoration of a man who had been, in E. P. Thompson's judgement, Britain's most important, 'courageous and judicious' radical theorist of the French Revolutionary years, a man who had once addressed crowds of 500–600, twice weekly in his London lecture rooms, and who had stood trial on a charge of High Treason for it:

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> He brought to its highest perfection the science which distinguishes mankind from the brute. In his utterances Englishmen experienced the full beauty and energy of their native speech. His oratorical powers were only surpassed by his devoted zeal and unflinching efforts to promote the best liberties of his fellow men'.[2]

Appropriately enough, this collection of essays originated in two conferences organized to mark the conservation of that very gravestone in 2006,[3] clear indicators of a recent upsurge of scholarly interest in Thelwall and evidence of a long-overdue assessment of the many facets of his life and legacy.[4] Identifying exactly who Thelwall was or how best to appraise his historical significance is not straightforward, for he was a Romantic and enlightenment polymath. On the one hand, he was the best-known lecturer and theorist in the London Corresponding Society (LCS) and the recipient of the disdainful soubriquet 'acquitted felon' following the collapse of the Pitt administration's case against him in 1794. On the other hand, he was also a painter, a poet, a novelist, a journalist and a playwright, a collaborator and confidante of Wordsworth and Coleridge during the year of *Lyrical Ballads*, a Romantic ruralist, a travel writer and pedestrian and an idealistic subsistence farmer in the Wye Valley. Then again, during the nineteenth century he became a pioneering elocutionist, curing young men from stammers and theorizing about phonetics at his own very successful London Institute. Although the separate strands of Thelwall's life and work have been considered at various times by scholars of all these disciplines, no volume has yet sought to bring them together or make sense of them as a whole; to understand, for example, the Thelwallian association between speech therapy, Romanticism, Jacobin polemic and practice, free speech, political economy and English constitutional history. In the absence of any modern biography of Thelwall then, the essays in this interdisciplinary collection address his historical significance more fully than ever before. Nicholas Roe's opening essay tackles the problem of Thelwall's identity head-on. The difficulty facing the modern biographer, he suggests, is not just one of coherently assembling the parts of a multifaceted career, but of pulling together sufficient source materials. The Thelwall manuscripts used by Charles Cestre in 1906 have gone missing without trace while many other sources remain scattered and fragmentary. As both Roe and Judith Thompson argue here, the weight of scholarly attention already devoted to Thelwall as the disreputable 'Jacobin Fox' of the 1790s has deflected interest from Thelwall the respectable elocutionist and lecturer on oratory who flourished a quarter of a century later. Roe's essay arranges the bones of a biographical skeleton and offers some timely suggestions by which we might flesh them out.

We should start here, perhaps, with some discussion of Thelwall's reputation as a Jacobin and 'acquitted felon'. The readiness of both E. P. Thompson and Iain Hampsher-Monk to apply, thirty years apart, the notoriously imprecise term 'Jacobin' to Thelwall, and indeed his own ironic acceptance of the term ('because

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it is fixed upon us, as a stigma, by our enemies') raises important questions about his identity, some of which have been discussed in detail elsewhere by Nicholas Roe.[5] Gregory Claeys has accepted him as a literal 'Jacobin' insofar as he held a 'burning "sans culotte" desire for social equality', but the common association of Jacobinism with the acceptance, not only of republicanism but of revolutionary violence, effectively places Thelwall broadly beyond its reach. The problem, however, is that most British radicals understood insurrection (or resistance) within a historical and constitutionalist framework that relates very imperfectly to the French experience of Jacobinism during revolution.[6] As James Epstein and David Karr have recently suggested, literal terms of reference may be of less use here than 'performative' ones, for English radicals of the 1790s sometimes adopted Jacobin performance as counterculture, by the adoption of 'Citizen' as a form of address, through toasts to the French Republic, or in the donning of French clothing styles.[7] If Thelwall's capture, interrogation and trial can themselves usefully be seen as arenas for performance, so too can his acquittal. When William Windham announced in the House of Commons that he wished Thelwall, Hardy and Horne Tooke 'all the joy of innocence of an acquitted felon', he provoked a storm of protest, chiefly from their co-defendant Thomas Holcroft who committed his indignance to print in pamphlet form, but also from Opposition MPs who demanded a retraction. As John Barrell has shown, Windham prevaricated awkwardly over the niceties of what he had actually *meant*,[8] but the phrase remained a memorable one, leaving them, as Thelwall noted, 'certain terrible fellows since known by the name of acquitted felons'.[9] The pernicious nature of the phrase lay in the fact that since Windham had been obliged to deny ever having actually called anyone an acquitted felon by name, its currency made it a suitable vehicle for stronger insults which pushed the boundaries of libel. Some might be content to talk of 'acquitted felons', declared the arch-loyalist William Atkinson, yet others might consider 'the rankest traitors' a more accurate term.[10] As John Barrell shows in his essay here, Thelwall and his fellow accused had plenty to feel outraged about, for the Crown's case against them, by which High Treason was more or less rendered 'figurative or virtual', had been engineered only by means of the most tortuous logic and 'crazily ramifying arguments'. Barrell's substantive point is that only Thelwall, and perhaps Erskine, seemed fully aware of the awful consequences for civil liberties should the prosecution get away with it. Thelwall's unused but subsequently published trial defence lays bare what he called the 'labyrinth of constructions' behind a Crown brief that might, if successful, have turned any attempt at extra-parliamentary lobbying into an act of constructive treason.

But, just as Thomas Spence had defused the power of Edmund Burke's pejorative epithet, 'the swinish multitude', by inverting it for ironic radical use as *Pigs Meat*, supporters of the LCS were soon drinking toasts to 'the innocence

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of acquitted felons', and Thelwall expressed his pride in accepting (once again) the 'honourable stigma' of the phrase. Coleridge invoked the 'eight triumphant acquitted felons' in his opposition to the Two Acts, Horne Tooke used his candidature in the following general election to campaign against an entire ministry of 'un-acquitted felons', and Thomas Erskine considered the words 'characteristic of the conduct and disposition of the present ministry'. Radical responses varied from triumphalism to ribald mockery: 'The Great Windhamite shall revile them … and call them innocent culprits and acquitted felons, and thy people shall laugh thereat and be exceeding merry', chortled one. From this inglorious height, the phrase slipped inexorably and broadly into a political discourse that recognized none of the boundaries originally intended for its use, prompting a complaint that,

> Protector and Abhorrer, Round-head and Cavalier, Whig and Tory, are the terms by which our ancestors distinguished parties; but we, more *ingenious*, no longer confine ourselves to generals, when we get a watchword such as s*winish multitude*, *perish commerce*, acquitted felon etc., its meaning is instantly perverted and it is bandied about from one end of the island to the other.[11]

Most commentaries on Thelwall, whether contemporary or modern, are concerned with his 'Jacobin' reputation as a lecturer. This was why satirists had been referring to him as 'Telwell' as early as 1794, and why, indeed, he became identifiable in satirical prints as a slight figure clutching a scroll emblazoned with the word, 'Lectures'.[12] Whether motivated by admiration or disgust, few accounts disagree that Thelwall was an animated and impassioned public performer. The Godwinian Thomas Amyot might have enjoyed Thelwall's relatively calm published critiques of Burke, but his appreciation of them was cast rudely aside as soon as he heard him lecturing.

> He 'raves like a mad Methodist Parson; the most ranting actor in the most ranting character never made so much noise as Citizen Thelwall; his voice, tho' sufficiently loud, is coarse and unpleasant and his action seems to have been learned at the School of Mendoza and Co. If it had not been for the feebleness of his person, I should almost have been led to suspect he was going to beat his audience out of doors.[13]

Thelwall's intemperate oratory has been discussed in terms of its relationship to religious enthusiasm by Jon Mee, and to the performative turn by Epstein and Karr, through which its extravagance becomes an expression of 'deep play' in radical practice, a process by which 'radicals understood the risks they were taking and their knowingness was matched by the excessiveness of their behaviour. Radicals did not merely play their roles: they overplayed them'.[14] Thelwall 'the ranter' was soon personified in Isaac D'Israeli's burlesque satire, *Vaurien*, as Citizen Rant himself, an immoderate agitator who boasts, 'My lungs, my arms,

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my feet, this cadaverous face, and these ferocious locks, flying like the serpent hair of furies, perform miracles among apprentices…'[15] But once removed from the Jacobin milieu and re-scripted as a professional lecturer on the politer provincial circuit of the post-war period, Thelwall's histrionic gifts found a more appreciative audience. A reporter for the *Manchester Times* in 1820 was clearly impressed:

> As an extemporaneous speaker, his powers are extremely remarkable. His words are happily chosen and happily placed. They express his precise meaning, neither more nor less, and his figurative illustrations, in which he frequently indulges, seem to be inspired by genius, as they are regulated by the most discriminating taste … he seems to have deeply studied what he professes to teach, not to have contented himself with the easier practice, too generally prevalent, of adopting the observations of others … he takes full possession of the minds of his audience. Their smiles or tears are at his command. He can 'enchant their ears'.

His penchant for 'extravagance' had not disappeared, but it seemed under tighter control, so that 'what would be wrong in another man is right in him. By his look and gesture, he anticipates each sentiment he is about to utter'.[16]

Thelwall's honing of his own oratorical voice during his nineteenth-century career as a public lecturer directly informed his parallel practice as a speech therapist and phonetic theorist. Two essays in this volume explore these interrelated concerns. Tara-Lynn Fleming focuses her attention upon the socially inclusive proto-democratic culture of the early lyceum movement with which Thelwall's speaking tours may be associated, and with the textual embodiment of that culture in the accompanying published volumes, the *Selections*. The recitation techniques around which Thelwall's elocutionary theories were organized may be seen as weapons against 'verbal and social repression rooted in speech', and a 'politically subversive engine of reform' in their own right. Both she and Judith Duchan are struck by Thelwall's performative interest in 'rhythmus', both in the flow of spoken language and the movement of the body when speaking. Duchan's essay here identifies the various elements in the conceptual methodology of Thelwall's elocutionary practice, and considers the particular role of speech in the performance of citizenship. Thelwall's elocutionary career demonstrates not only his significance as a founding theorist of that discipline, but a deep conviction too that public virtue was attainable only through the 'creative faculty of discourse'.

In a brief obituary published in the sympathetic *Bath Guardian* in 1834, Thelwall's contribution to written and spoken forms was succinctly summarized, and with a qualification that would become familiar. 'His talents as a speaker were of a very high order', it conceded, but 'as a writer he was unsuccessful'.[17] Thelwall's words, then, became persuasive through animation, or through their staging in performance, but lacked substance on the printed page; a triumph, perhaps, of

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form over content. Hostile critics, anxious about the influence of demagoguery upon the pliant and irrational minds of the swinish multitude, certainly thought this the case. 'I have *printed* in every class of literature; but whatever is most energetic from my tribune makes no impression in print', declares Citizen Rant, 'My works are like the acidity of lemon squeezed on salts of wormwood; if the instant froth is not caught, 'tis vapidness!' Rant acknowledges that his words are without substance on the printed page, 'but approach my tribune, hear my screams of indignation, my whispers of discovery, the foaming vengeance of my mouth, the thundering resolution of my arm and the audible contempt of my foot. I assure you, citizens, a living line of animation runs along the room...'[18] Loyalist writers were under no illusions about the danger posed by Thelwall's excitable lecturing style. Robert Bisset considered him the new John Ball, fusing them together in an historical essay ostensibly about the Peasants Revolt, but where 'John made many converts among the most ignorant of the populace. Had the government been sufficiently vigilant to stop John's lectures when their rebellious tendency first appeared' the consequent 'riot and insurrection', no less than the murder of 'the primate, the chancellor, the high treasurer and all other persons of rank and distinction who fell in their way', might have been avoided. [19] To Thelwall's disappointment of course, critics of his intemperance were not all arch-loyalists like Bisset. On the contrary, they included Coleridge ('You talk loudly and rapidly; but powers of vociferation do not constitute a PATRIOT')[20] and William Godwin. In other respects a close political ally, and a fellow traveller whose *Political Justice* Thelwall had done much to popularize, Godwin preferred 'writing quarto volumes and convening with a few speculative philosophers by the fire side' to risking unregulated dissemination in a plebeian public sphere. The tension between the quiet philosophical radicalism of Godwin and the more active proselytizing of Thelwall has been amply discussed in recent years as an exemplar of radical debates over strategy. Yet, as Kenneth Johnston argues in his essay here, strategy scarcely mattered, given the determination of Pitt's ministry to crush the movement in whatever clothes it made an appearance. Thelwall's performative intemperance, it is shown, in a careful analysis of the provocative republication of his lectures in *The Tribune*, 'was necessary to his rhetoric, as a response to the *intemperateness* of the government's actions and reactions'. But in any case, Thelwall's abandonment of platform politics in 1797 did nothing to save him from attack; rather it disabled him. The whole tenor of his performance to this point had been to provoke and test repressive legislation. This he could resist, in court once again if necessary, but resisting the unofficial barracking of extra-judicial intimidation was an entirely different proposition.[21] The question of strategy, and the tension between Thelwall's use of literary forms on the one hand and mass platform lecturing on the other for political ends, is also addressed in Yasmin Solomonescu's essay here. In a close reading, not of

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the *Tribune* but of the earlier *Peripatetic*, a work she regards as Thelwall's 'earliest literary experiment in political consciouness-raising', Solomonescu unravels some of the difficulties and doubts Thelwall himself expressed about both forms of approach. Rather than give in to the difficulties of creating a shared political consciousness through the individualized responses engendered by readers of literature, Thelwall strove to develop a 'theory and practice of writing' in which the distinction (between collective and individual forms of address) breaks down.

The common dismissal of Thelwall's contribution to political thought as rhetorically spectacular but theoretically insubstantial was not confined to his contemporaries. In Philip Brown's estimation, Thelwall 'was not a profound thinker but he had the qualities which matter; he was genuine, sturdy and sound'. Brown, one senses, would have chosen the dependable Thelwall for the school football team before securing him a place in the senior debating society. Even Charles Cestre, for whom Thelwall's 'honesty, sincerity and single-minded devotedness' were unquestionable, believed him 'not one of those highly gifted men who stand prominently at the head of their age' and conceded that his 'social doctrine' had become 'out of touch with the newer, more precise claims of factory workers' by the early years of the nineteenth century. Albert Goodwin, the first historian to consider the agitations of the LCS in any detail, was not exactly hostile to Thelwall, but believed his revolutionary influence misjudged by his critics; touched by bravura but moderate at heart, and found him 'neither an original nor a subversive thinker'. E. P. Thompson's admiration for Thelwall as a radical icon during the heroic 1794–6 period is evident enough, but it never got in the way of his post-1797 retrospective summary: that 'he posed as the Patriot and then as the Recluse and failed in both roles'.[22]

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Thelwall has even been pulled up for having insufficiently advanced gender politics. In *The Rights of Nature*, he critiqued Burke's attempt to restrict those who 'in any political view are to be called "the People"' to a leisured, educated and privileged 400,000, for example, on grounds that by Burke's own admission, the figure included 'twenty thousand petticoat allies – ladies of the court and ladies of the town!', an indiscretion seized upon by Anna Clark as evidence that 'Thelwall expressed hostility to the idea that women could be included in public opinion'. While it would be ridiculous to claim him as a feminist, and Clark is right to note that 'few male radicals considered the possibility of female citizenship', her position is not strengthened by Thelwall's careful accommodation of women at his lectures. Far from excluding women from public opinion, Thelwall moved his lectures from New Compton Street in 1794 because at the former venue, 'numerous citizens of both sexes who wished to attend were disappointed from the want of room', and at Beaufort Buildings, 'ladies' were not only made welcome but 'advised to attend early, as it may otherwise be difficult to procure convenient seats'. Godwin's criticism of Thelwall's populism was based at least

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in part upon what he called the lectures' 'mixed' audience. At the ill-fated Yarmouth lecture in 1796 moreover, women figured among the injured when the meeting was attacked by a loyalist mob.[23]

As the unresolved question of Thelwall's gender politics demonstrates, debates over the nature of the Jacobin and plebeian public sphere remain cogent. Georgina Green's essay in the present volume is a contribution to this field. Green's interest is in the formulation of Thelwall's 'public', and the theoretical underpinnings of his insistence on agitation led by the 'physical' and 'living body' of public opinion, his emphasis upon politics as a communal experience, and the 'promiscuous' conception of audience that Godwin found so distasteful. She skilfully exposes contemporary loyalist fears of an embodied LCS, glimpsed as a 'coup d'œil' at Copenhagen House, and assuming a 'presence or visibility that critiques their invisibility in virtual representation'. Investigations into the nature of 'public' discourse during the 1790s have, unsurprisingly, drawn upon the conceptual 'public sphere' of Jürgen Habermas. Corinna Wagner's contribution to this book takes as its starting point tensions between transparency and concealment in Habermas's public sphere and further develops recent work by John Brewer and John Barrell on the shifting boundaries of public and private life in the 1790s. Thelwall is unique, she argues, 'less in his republicanism or his delineation of civic virtue, than in the way he sets about using his private life to pragmatically demonstrate abstract principles'. In a range of published works, she finds him remarkably candid about his own domestic autobiography, demonstrating an important theoretical association between personal and public openness and the secretive, corrupt behaviour of the Pitt regime, its spies and its informants. But, as he found in the course of an acrimonious exchange with the editor of the *Edinburgh Review* in 1804, living one's life in public was not without its costs.

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Thelwall is beginning, slowly, to attract greater attention as a serious political thinker. Substantive modern discussions of radical ideology have, until recently, followed Goodwin's accusation of intellectual unoriginality. Despite E. P. Thompson's early suggestion in *The Making* that Thelwall was the movement's 'most important' theorist for instance, H. T. Dickinson's influential analysis of eighteenth-century political thought found little of note beyond the radical redefinition, in *The Rights of Nature* (1796), of property as, essentially, labour itself. 'Unfortunately', he concluded, Thelwall failed to 'develop this insight into a coherent theory of labour', and so far as unequal distribution of income was concerned, 'failed to offer any economic solution to the problem'. Thelwall's more recent restoration as a serious theorist owes much to the important work of Iain Hampsher-Monk and Gregory Claeys, for whom he was not only 'the chief orator, strategist and theoretician' of the LCS but 'the leading republican writer in Britain' after Paine's departure in 1792. Claeys has picked up Thomp-

son's assertion and explored it thoroughly in a number of influential essays and the first edited collection of Thelwall's political writings. His most recent work finds Thelwall fully incorporated into 'the origins of modern politics' alongside (and given comparable weight with) Burke, Paine, Wollstonecraft and Godwin, principally for the part he played in moving radicalism beyond a moral distaste for wealth and luxury and heralding 'that idea of co-operative partnership between labour and capital which some socialists found an attractive alternative to both capitalism and communism in the following century', or as Hampsher-Monk put it, 'the process by which nostalgic radicalism became progressive and forward looking'.[24]

Two essays in this book explore these issues in depth. Robert Lamb's contribution shifts the debate over *The Rights of Nature* away from its 'proto-socialist analysis of exploited workers and the corresponding case for a redistribution of resources', to consider for the first time Thelwall's theoretical account of private property rights themselves. In the process he establishes a clear case against Dickinson's dismissal of Thelwall's coherence, and shows how Thelwall modified Locke to produce a theory of labour that justified the right to private property in land while at the same time demanding its extension to individual workers. Lamb's essay uniquely considers Thelwall's conception of rights within a framework informed by both utilitarianism and the conflicting historical theories of economic development associated with the Scottish Enlightenment, and proposes a utilitarian basis for Thelwall's theory of property. Richard Sheldon's essay takes a different tack. Sheldon is unconvinced by the argument that Thelwall produced a labour theory of value and questions the association between his attitude to political economy and early socialism. Thelwall, he maintains, was an opponent of both moral economy and the restrictive economic policies of the French Jacobins. Concentrating on Thelwall's writings on dearth, the grain trade and agricultural monopoly in 1795, Sheldon finds him more a progenitor of the Anti Corn Law League and J. S. Mill than of socialism or radical Chartism, closer in his attitude to subsistence rights to Condorcet and Smith than to the radical anti-capitalism of Thomas Spence.

Beyond the flexible labels of lecturer and theorist, or Jacobin and 'acquitted felon', the diversity of Thelwall's career has made him difficult for academics to pigeon-hole, and a source, variously, of admiration, confusion and disappointment for many of those that have tried. This is particularly evident in responses to areas of Thelwall's life that have traditionally been seen as peripheral to politics and the concerns of serious history. Reviewing Thelwall's 1797 walking tour from London to Somerset, for example, E. P. Thompson found it 'unremarkable, being largely devoted to conventional rehearsals of the "romantic and picturesque"', his sporadic 'attempts to discover the views of the labouring classes' as he went, doomed to failure by the inability of his class to make easy conversa-

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tion with uncultivated rustics. Thompson's disappointment, rooted partly in an underlying suspicion of radical figures who 'had always been ambitious to cut a figure in the world of letters', betrays an irritation with fair-weather Jacobins in 'retreat' from politics. Literary scholars, on the other hand, have read the Tour in rather a different light. For Robin Jarvis, Thelwall's 'intellectual mobility' as a pedestrian is laudable, indicating not a loss of direction but 'the subjectivity of a man honest enough not to dissimulate his educated high-cultural tastes beneath a bogusly uniform demagoguery'. Michael Scrivener, a contributor to this volume, finds the pedestrian tour 'a remarkable if also flawed document, one of the finest achievements of British Jacobin prose, at least as energetic and intellectually rigorous as anything Cobbett wrote later'. Unlike Thompson, whose concerns were rather different, Scrivener has allowed himself the time to deconstruct some of Thelwall's picturesque reveries to reveal its inherently democratic form, a framework through which the pedestrian 'suggests that receptivity to beauty is not an aristocratic privilege'.[25] Another contributor, Judith Thompson, has also done much to reposition pedestrianism as a serious component of Thelwall's democratic thought. 'Walking along public roads', she reminds us, 'engaging in the Socratic dialogue of the *peripateio* with the people he met, was not only a ruling passion but a way of life'.[26]

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E. P. Thompson was no more impressed by Thelwall's penchant for writing 'mediocre' poetry, 'a crime which, though it is committed around us every day, historians and critics cannot forgive'. Yet again, Scrivener is less impatient, conscious that both Coleridge and Wordsworth, 'not known for flattering other people's poetry insincerely', praised it on a number of occasions; indeed Judith Thompson has recognized its important influence on Wordsworth's political sonnets, the *Lyrical Ballads*, and Shelley's *Prometheus* 'as well as a later generation of Chartist poets'.[27] Three essays in this volume, by Jon Mee, Judith Thompson and Michael Scrivener subject Thelwall's poems and plays to contextual analysis as expressions of political, rather than simply literary, practice. Jon Mee's focus is on Thelwall's *Poems Written in the Tower*, conceived as he awaited trial and published after his acquittal in 1795, and their impact on his relationship with Coleridge. Through consideration of the intertextuality of Thelwall's verse and Coleridge's 'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison', Mee reveals the common concern of both poets in the material and metaphorical nature of incarceration, social exclusion and confinement. Coleridge, of course, whose imaginative imprisonment was entirely figurative, had little to complain about beyond the self-denying privations of voluntary rural retirement, but for Thelwall, imagination became the key to displacement from the material circumstances of his cell's 'damp foul floor' and 'noxious gloom'. As Mee points out, Thelwall wrote with one eye on his own projection to posterity as an historical martyr to Liberty, but he makes no claims about the quality of the poetry. In her own contribution to this book,

Judith Thompson is equally concerned with Thelwall's historical interests. Her essay gathers the fragments of Thelwall's epic but unfinished Saxon poem, *The Hope of Albion*, a work previously somewhat neglected by literary scholars, and through which Thelwall emerges as 'not only an ambitious but a surprisingly good poet'. As its title suggests, this important poem is a political allegory, its timeless Albion, 'a nation silenced and morally paralysed by and in its political rivalries and class divisions, whose masters and masses are equally trapped and tormented by the tyranny they practice and the slavery they have blindly accepted'. As she has suggested elsewhere, allegorical themes like these demand critical attention, not only in the later poems but in Thelwall's long out of print novel, *The Daughter of Adoption* (1801), a work passed over rather quickly by E. P. Thompson as a 'conventional money-spinner'. As Judith Thompson has said, the novel willingly tackles 'the politics of gender, race and class, and the complex interrelations between domestic and colonial affairs',[28] themes in Thelwall's published output which echo many of those underpinning his equally overlooked work as a dramatist. The drafts of two previously unpublished plays, *Incle and Yarico* and *The Incas*, neither of which were ever performed in Thelwall's lifetime, have been recently rescued from oblivion and published in a critical edition by Michael Scrivener and Frank Felsenstein.[29] In his essay for this volume, Scrivener reveals the importance of both these works in the making of Thelwall's political ideology, for they reflect his developing concern with issues of empire, the slave trade and the representation of race. Thelwall's internationalism and commitment to the cause of abolition, acknowledged but never subjected to analysis by previous scholars, emerge as key themes in these early works, and Scrivener identifies them both not only as anti-imperialist allegories but as a vigorous defence of the humanitarian principles of the French Revolution.

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Taken as a whole then, these essays explore both familiar and less familiar avenues in Thelwall's complex and significant career. While the concern of the book is to emphasize Thelwall the polymath, it is also to recognize the underlying coherence of his seemingly diverse interests, and the vitality of the political framework upon which he hung them. Most importantly perhaps, we seek to demonstrate that in his temporary withdrawal at the close of the 1790s, the 'political fox' was not quite so dead as we have been led to believe.[30]