[Sitter]

**Thomas Thirlwall, 1763/4–1827 [DRAFT 4]**

Thomas Thirlwall is generally remembered as father of his distinguished son, Connop Thirlwall (1797–1875), historian of Greece and Bishop of St David’s, but was himself notable as a religious writer and a public moralist, as a speaker and in print.

The family claimed a link with the Thirlwalls of ruined Thirlwall Castle near Hexham and, according to Thomas’s obituary in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1827, pt. 1, pp. 568–9), his father, also Thomas, had preceded him at Brasenose College, Oxford, and became vicar of Cottingham near Hull. This fiction may have started with the latter’s August 1808 death notice in the same source (*GM,* pt. 2, p.757) in which misspelling as ‘Thomas Thirlwell, M.A., of Brazenose College’ points to the greater error on both occasions that the vicar of Cottingham from 1789 to his death in 1808, was Stephen Thurlwell (b. 1751). Thurlwell attended neither Oxford nor Cambridge but previously ran a school at West Heslerton, Yorks., after reportedly starting life as a Tadcaster bricklayer. That may also be a myth based on name coincidence: there was a Tadcaster mason named Stephen Thurlwell but his dates were 1776–1842.

Thomas Thirlwall was in fact the third son, and fourth child of six, of an Excise officer called John Thirlwall (1716–76) and his wife Elizabeth (nėe Maddison, *c.*1730–1819). They married on 13 April 1754 at Monk Hesleden, Durham, just six weeks before the baptism there on 28 May of their eldest child, Hannah (1754­–1833). Monk Hesledon and West Heslerton are 60 miles apart but place-name confusion probably also contributes to that between ‘Thirlwall’ and ‘Thurlwell’.

The Thirlwalls’ second and third children were John and Liddle: the latter, from about 1788 a prosperous London linen-draper in St John Street, West Smithfield, was baptised at St Cuthbert’s, Darlington, on 9 September 1761, as was Thomas on 14 March 1764 and two final sisters; Elizabeth on 15 October 1766 and Ann on 16 August 1769. That their father was in the Excise service appears in record of the last three and his own burial at St Cuthbert’s. Thomas was therefore either born early in 1764 or possibly late in 1763 and not into a ‘professional’ family in contemporary terms. The 1808 error that by 1827 made him a ‘son of the cloth’ improved his social pedigree and it would have been surprising if his children had said anything public denying it.

Thomas certainly did well to gain a place at Brasenose, aged 16, in April 1780, graduating as BA in March 1784 and MA in November 1786. He was appointed curate of Mentmore, Bucks., in 1788 and at St Dunstan’s, Stepney, from 1790 to 1814 where he was the parish ‘Lecturer’. About 1803 he further appears in sermon press notices as curate of Little [Holy] Trinity in the Minories, although this is not listed in the clergy database. From at least 1798 he was also chaplain to the Mile End Volunteers, though his formal militia appointments there are only noted later (*London Gazette*, 1800 and 1803). Around 1810 press advertisements also refer to him as Minister of the Tavistock Chapel in Long Acre. In 1814 he was presented by John Curtis Esq.– presumably the local landowner – to the rectorship of St Margaret’s, Bowers Gifford, Essex, and gained the further benefice of stipendiary curate of Pitsea from 1815.

On 19 June 1792, Thirlwall married at St Dunstan’s to Susanna (sometimes ‘Susannah’) Connop. Born about 1755, she was widow of William Connop (1752–90) a Mile End surgeon and apothecary, and son of a father of the same name who was also a surgeon there. The Connops were reportedly Welsh and Susanna – whose maiden name was also Connop – appears to have been a cousin of her first husband, whom she had married at St Dunstan’s on 8 October 1776. They had one son, also William (b. 1778 but fate unknown) and when widowed she was left with ‘a good fortune’ that probably helped support her new partner’s non-stipendiary activities. The Thirlwall marriage was conducted by the Revd Thomas Wigzell, at that time a Bristol curate but who later held livings in Suffolk. Why he was officiating as ‘Minister’ at St Dunstan’s is not clear but perhaps solely as a family friend given that he was namesake and probably godfather to Thomas and Susanna’s eldest son. Thirlwall’s linen-draper brother, Liddle (d. 1823), was also one of the marriage witnesses. Another was Susannah Connop (1746–95) a slightly older cousin of the bride and also subsequently godmother to the Thirlwalls’ eldest son Thomas Wigzell Thirlwall.

In 1798, Thirlwall’s first reported publication was *The Alarming Situation of the Times, a Fast Sermon preached at Stepney* in 1795. The title is indicative of the moralistic, conservative views for which he found many platforms to express, including as a speaker at East India House and the Middlesex elections, as well as from various pulpits, as a Middlesex JP from 1811 and one in Essex after his move there. He was a prominent member of the Society for the Suppression of Vice and became notable in a long rear-guard campaign in its name to close the Royalty Theatre, Wellclose Square (1787–1826), the only one then existing on the eastern edge of the City of London. In 1803 (but usually noted in the second edition of 1804) he published *A Solemn Protest against the Revival of Scenic Exhibitions and Interludes at the Royalty Theatre* [etc…] together with objections to several popular plays of the day and spoke against its annual applications for licensing by the local bench, though ultimately unsuccessfully. A counter-pamphlet by John Percival (advertised in the *Morning Chronicle*, 19 April 1804) pilloried his position as ‘The Resurrection of Cromwell!’

For some time in the early 1800s Thirlwall was also chaplain to Thomas Percy, Bishop of Dromore (1729–1811), editor of the *Reliques of early English Poetry*. Percy reportedly helped him start preparing an edition of the works of Jeremy Taylor (1613–67), Chaplain to Charles II. Longman’s issued the first printing of *Holy Living* in 1807, with a second in 1810, and in 1814 it was again included with one of Taylor’s *Discourses*. Thirlwall’s edition of Taylor’s *Holy Dying* followed in 1819 (though this was possibly also a reprint). In 1809 he dedicated to Percy a pamphlet of essays and poems titled *Primitiae*, demonstrating the early talents of his eleven-year-old son Connop as their author: it saw three printings in that year. In 1802 he also published an augmented Latin edition of Joseph White’s *Diatesseron* or treatise on the Gospels which was reissued in English in 1803: a second English edition appeared in 1815. Other publications included an edition of the works of Sir Matthew Hale (1805), further sermons and contributions to the *Orthodox Churchman’s Magazine.*

In 1817 Thirlwall was called to answer at the bar of the House of Commons for breach of Parliamentary privilege in remarks made (primarily on p. 108) in his *A Vindication of the Magistrates acting in and for the Tower Division, from the Charges contained in a printed work entitled, ‘A* *Report of the State of the Police in the Metropolis* …’ This book-length pamphlet (367 pp) was published in February, in response to that Parliamentary Committee police report, and when he appeared on 17 May he explained that the ‘libel’ was unintentional, the product of haste and that the work, based on his prior experience as a Middlesex magistrate, had achieved much wider notice than he had expected. The House reprimanded him but accepted his ‘manly and respectful’ apology without further action. He was perhaps lucky, since he had by then also published a second pamphlet refuting criticism of his *Vindication* in another by a Mr Beaumont (*Morning* *Post,* 4 April 1817)

Thirlwall’s elder sons were Thomas Wigzell Thirlwall, also a clergyman (1793–1846) and John Pyefinch Thirlwall (1794–1841): the latter was apprenticed to a Cornhill ironmonger in 1808 and became a Freeman of the Ironmongers’ Company in 1819, then a merchant at Quebec in the 1820s and on St Vincent in the Caribbean in the 1830s. Both he and his wife Carrington (née Henderson, 1803–52), though overwhelmingly her except in respect of two individuals, received compensation as slave-owners in St Vincent after Abolition in 1833. Her ownership was one of estate inheritance from her father John Henderson, of whom her husband was executor and a co-trustee. John Pyefinch died at Kingstown, St Vincent, where he was buried on 22 July 1841. When his elder son, the Revd Thomas James Thirlwall (b. Quebec, 1827 [*or 1828 TBC*]) married for the first time to Maria Payne, daughter of a naval officer, at Chelsea in 1852 he was noted as a ‘Merchant’ and at his second marriage in September 1862 as a ‘Gent’, but at neither as already ‘deceased’. Thomas James’s younger brother John (b. Quebec, 1829 [*or 1830 TBC*]) briefly attended Exeter College, Oxford, in 1848 before becoming a barrister. The also had a sister [*details TBC, but see below*].

Thomas Thirlwall’s third son, Richard (1795–6), died in infancy leaving Connop, the fourth, as youngest survivor. The common belief that his first names were ‘Newell Connop’ appears to have originated largely through his original 1890s entry in *DNB*. He was only baptised Connop but did have an older cousin called Newell Connop who, with Connop’s eldest brother Thomas Wigzell Thirlwall and his mother Susanna (Newell’s aunt) was a co-executor of Thomas senior’s will in 1827: it is not clear how the ‘Newell’ also attached to Connop and it is not on his bust or gravestone in Westminster Abbey. His nephew the Revd Thomas James Thirlwall was living with him at Abergwilly, Camarthen, at the 1851 census and the latter’s barrister brother John acted as his secretary in the 1850s and 1860s, and was caring for him at his death in Bath in 1875. Both brothers were Connop’s executors and heirs. John subsequently emigrated to Minnesota and died there in 1877. Thomas James died as vicar of Nantmel, Radnorshire, in March 1900.

At the time of Thomas Thirlwall’s death, aged 63 at Bowers Gifford on 17 March 1827, his son Thomas Wigzell was a Fellow (1816–33) of St John’s College, Cambridge, where he graduated as BA in 1815, MA in 1818 and Bachelor of Divinity in 1826. In 1835 he was appointed rector of Pirton, Herts., and by the time of his mother Susanna’s death in January 1843, she was living with him and his family at Ickleford Rectory, Herts. A brief *Gentleman’s Magazine* notice (April 1847, p. 444) following his sudden death at Baldock, aged 54, on 21 December 1846 as consequence of stroke, says he was presented to the rectorship of Ickleford-cum-Pirton earlier in that year by J.W. Peers Esq.: this must be an error, since he was already living at Ickleford Rectory at the 1841 census. His mother and a female Carrington Thirlwall (age stated as 30 and ‘independent’) were also there for the census. This was probably his brother John’s wife, though she was perhaps a little older to have had a first known son in 1827/8 [*or is this possibly JPT’s daughter?*].

Thirlwall’s obituary in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* for June 1827 (pt 1, pp. 568–9) itemizes other issues in which it reviewed some of his works, sometimes at second rather than first printing. It may also be source of the general later error of calling Connop Thirlwall his second son, when in fact third survivor. All four boys were baptised at St Dunstan’s, Stepney. The register a little unusually gives childrens’ ages at the time in days, from which probable birth dates can be derived: Thomas Wigzell Thirlwall, bap. 19 June 1793 (b. 29 April); John Pyefinch Thirlwall, bap. 11 July 1794 (b. 4 June); Richard Herbert Thirlwall, bap. 5 November 1795 (b. 2 October), buried at St Andrew, Enfield, 5 February 1796; Connop Thirlwall (*sic*) bap. 5 May 1797 (b. 13 February by count but usually stated as 11 February).

There is an oil portrait of Thomas Thirlwall in the National Library of Wales. The artist is unidentified but it was probably painted shortly after 1795, partly based on the sitter’s apparent age and dress, and because he is wearing a slightly unusual and probably mourning ring. While perhaps for the death of his infant third son, Richard in 1796, it may more likely be for his wife’s cousin Susanna (d. October 1795). She seems to have lived her last years with them at Mile End and dictated a deathbed will to Thirlwall a few days before she died: he was also principal executor of her approximately £300 estate.

The portrait was presented in 1952 by the Worcester solicitors Livingstone, Wood & Clark (otherwise Wood, Livingstone & Clark). It seems almost certain that the previous owner was Evelyn Maud Thirlwall of Droitwich (d. November 1951), widow of Edmund Schmitz Thirlwall (1868–1945). Edmund was a retired farmer, a great-grandson of the sitter and youngest son of the Revd Thomas James Thirlwall of Nantmel. Edmund also had two elder half-brothers (i.e. sons of their father’s first wife, Maria), Lawrence Connop Thirlwall who moved to Australia where he died in 1944, and Francis Hugh Thirlwall who died at Canterbury in 1923.

Evelyn Thirlwall died in November 1951 with probate following in July 1952, and while Livingston, Wood & Clark were not her executors they were involved in dealing with her affairs. She and Edmund had no children, and her own property was left to her sisters and two friends. The portrait is not mentioned in her will but she, or the executors may have expressed a wish that it go to Wales, for the family connections there. The portrait is therefore presumed to have descended from either John Pyefinch Thirlwall and /or his younger brother Bishop Connop Thirlwall to Edmund, and thence to his widow Evelyn.

*PvdM and OB/ May 2021: partly based on Art UK discussion of the Thirlwall portrait, National Museum of Wales*