SIAMESE TWINS IN THE PARISH REGISTERS OF SHEPSHED, LEICESTERSHIRE

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'Too children of Stephen Sweane growinge together having too hedes foure armes and 4 handes four Legs and foure feete & but one Nawyll the XVith of June 1600.'

'Two children of Thomas & Jane Dolman born growing together hawing two heads & necks very complete four arms and hands three legs and Feet and one body of the female sex See a similar entry in the year 1600.' (January 18, 1818)

These two citations occur in the burial register of Shepshed, Leicestershire. No mention was made of these children in the parochial register of baptisms — were they born dead? did their parents or the attending midwife snuff out their brief existence? Such questions spring quickly to mind. The phenomenon of Siamese twins is one lacuna in the history of the family which has received almost no attention. However, we should not by surprised at this silence on the part of commentators in that the event itself is exceedingly rare. The point of this communication is not to propose a history of Siamese twins but rather to comment on several aspects of its occurrence in Shepshed. These two citations are particularly revealing and a short discussion about them would be worthwhile.

From the point of view of the local historian who is concerned with the way in which past generations used their vital records to retain contact with the village’s traditions this notation in 1818 is significant. It shows quite clearly that the register of baptisms, burials and marriages was something more than a registry and played a lively role in the villagers’ consciousness of their past. In point of fact, however, we should correct this previous statement inasmuch as almost none of the villagers in nineteenth century Shepshed would have been able to trace their family’s presence in an unbroken line stretching over some eight or nine generations. Even so, the village records did speak to members of the community and seemingly gave them a sense of continuity.

If, as I have argued, there was scarcely a village family in 1818 which could trace its line directly back to Queen Elizabeth’s final years, can we then try to make any suggestions about the village’s pool of genetic characteristics? Would it be warranted to speculate about the connections — uncertain as they may be — between our two cases? To be thorough would require more than a single parish reconstitution study and, what is more, it would also be necessary to create genealogies which would make it possible to track down the possible links between Stephen Sweane and the later-mentioned Thomas and Jane Dolman. As such links could go equally through the father's or mother's side of the family and would need to be traced back across several hundred years the task itself would be formidable. Moreover, even if one could actually make all these connections and construct the appropriate pedigrees we would still be far from certain that a proper correct link was made. A residue of doubt must still remain in the absence of more precise attri-
butions of genetic characteristics of the people in question. Nonetheless, the problem is an intriguing one although it just might be more susceptible to musings than disciplined analysis.

Finally, the actual recording of the events differs in two essential regards: in the first place no mention is made of the mother in the 1600 citation and, secondly, the sex of the children is omitted from the first event. These differences in registration practice would seem to mirror larger changes in family life away from a patriarchal perception to one which was more egalitarian and allowed for the individuality of wives and children.

These random thoughts will, I hope, provoke some further discussion of the question of 'monsters' and unnatural births and shed a ray of light on this purloin of family life in past times.