Medical History

Royal twins

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Twins occur in Britain roughly once in 80 pregnancies, and in royal circles their frequency has been of this order. An estimate of the number of pregnancies to women who were, or who became, Queens or Queen Consorts of England from 1066 to the present day is about 160; two twin pregnancies probably occurred, one to the Princess of Denmark, later Queen Anne, and one to the Duchess of Clarence, later Queen Adelaide. In Scotland the expected frequency has been somewhat exceeded: there were probably fewer than 100 royal pregnancies between the uniting of the four Scottish kingdoms under Duncan I in 1034 and the end of the reign of James VI in 1625, but these also yielded two twin pregnancies—to Joan Beaufort, wife of James I, and to Mary Queen of Scots.

Even given the increased fetal and neonatal mortality of twins, the outcome of these pregnancies has been unusually poor.

Queen Anne, attributed to M Dahl (left) and by the studio of J Closterman (right).

Anne, Princess of Denmark

The details of Anne's twin pregnancy remain uncertain. Her biographer, David Green,¹ reported that her 13th pregnancy ended in a twin miscarriage on 20 September 1696, of "A son of seven months' growth and the other of two or three months'."*

It is scarcely possible for Anne to have been seven months pregnant on 20 September, given that this means some 30 weeks, since she had been delivered of a stillborn daughter only 30½ weeks earlier on 17 February. Even a six months' pregnancy, which the Danish Ambassador reported, would have been possible only if she had conceived at the first ovulation after her confinement. That the two fetuses should appear of different maturity, strange though this sounds, might be so since in some twin pregnancies one fetus may die and be retained in the uterus, to be expelled later as a fetus papyraceous, whose size would be considerably smaller than that of the accompanying twin.

*In earlier times the phrase "miscarriage" was loosely used to refer to a pregnancy whose outcome was unsuccessful whether this event was before or after 28 weeks of pregnancy.

A careful search of contemporary sources has not disclosed confirmation of this multiple pregnancy, which is merely recorded by Narcissus Luttrell, the annalist and bibliographer, as the miscarriage of a son.² Elsewhere Anne's next pregnancy, her 14th, is reported as ending on 25 March 1697 in the miscarriage of twins at a stage too early to determine sex.³ Green, however, merely records this as a miscarriage without mention of twins, so whether the princess had twin miscarriages in successive pregnancies or merely one, of which the details have become distorted, must remain uncertain. Whichever it was, no live child ensued.

Adelaide, Duchess of Clarence

The Duchess of Clarence had a sad obstetric history. She had married the Duke in July 1818, some nine months after the death in childbirth of the sole heir to the throne, Princess Charlotte, on 6 November 1817. In the first three years of marriage Adelaide suffered a three months' miscarriage; was delivered at 32 weeks of a premature daughter, who died in a few hours; and gave birth at 34 weeks to a second premature daughter, who survived for three months. By this time the future Queen Victoria had been born to the Duke and Duchess of

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Queen Adelaide by W Beechey.

Kent and was heir to the throne but would be superseded if the Duchess of Clarence should give birth to a surviving child.

It was, therefore, in an atmosphere of hopeful expectancy of having a child who would one day rule Britain that William, Duke of Clarence, wrote from his home at Bushy House to Lord Liverpool on 8 March 1822 to report that:

"I have today written to the King to inform him that in all probability the Duchess is six months gone with child. She is, thank God, particularly well and has enjoyed perfect health since she has resided at this place. She is a great deal stronger than when she was in the same situation the year before last. She will be able here to take air and exercise which was not in her power whilst residing in London. I trust in God we may look forward now with confidence to the Duchess becoming a happy mother."⁴

It is tragic that so hopeful a letter should have been followed so soon by news of a further sorrow for the duchess. A month after announcing the news of the pregnancy Clarence⁵ was obliged to write again to his elder brother, George IV, in these melancholy terms:

"It becomes my painful duty to inform Your Majesty that the amiable and excellent Duchess miscarried yesterday afternoon of twins; I want words to express my feelings at these repeated misfortunes to this beloved and superior woman: when I recollect she was married in July 1818 she had a premature labour in the following March owing to a severe illness, a miscarriage at Dunkirk in the ensuing September, the lamentable loss in March 1821 of her daughter and now this fresh affliction, I feel what I cannot describe for her: she is really to be pitied."

We have no details of Adelaide's delivery, which by the Duke's reckoning occurred at seven months and must be regarded as a premature labour and not a miscarriage. It is not surprising that the duchess should have a third preterm labour after two

previous ones, or that twins of perhaps 30 weeks or so would not have survived. It is greatly to the Duke's credit, as his biographer, Philip Ziegler emphasises,⁶ that his thoughts were entirely for his wife, "that beloved and superior woman"; he did not even record the sex of the infants.

Queen Joan

The only royal twins to survive birth were born to Joan, daughter of the Earl of Somerset and Queen to King James I of Scotland.

Two Latin texts refer to the birth. Book VII of the *Historians of Scotland*—the first volume,⁷ devoted to Pluscarden—prints the longer account, which also appears in the *Life and Death of King James the First*.⁸ In translation this reads:

"In the year 1430 there was born unto the King two male twins, the sons of the King and Queen, whereat all the world exulted with very great joy all over the Kingdom; and in the town of Edinburgh, seeing that they were born in the Monastery of Holyrood, bonfires were lighted, flagons of wine were free to all and victuals publicly to all comers, with the sweetest of harmony of all kinds of musical instruments all night long, proclaiming the praise and glory of God for all His gifts and benefits. They were born on the 16th day of the month of October. The first was called Alexander and he died in youth. The second was James, the second of that name. But King James I their father created a great many knights on the occasion of their birth, to whit these two sons of his over the baptismal font, and in the second place he created many others in their honour."

The phrase recorded here as "died in youth" is a translation of the words "defunctus est in juventute."

The shorter account, to be found in *Scotichronicon*,⁹ states the same facts about the time and place of the birth then refers to Alexander "qui moritur infans"—presumably died in childhood. The *Dictionary of National Biography*¹⁰ merely states that he died "young"; the *Scots Peerage*¹¹ describes his death as "in infancy."

Little here, therefore, suggests that either prematurity or being a twin was an important factor in Alexander's death, which may well have been due to one of the multitude of childhood disorders which caused so high a mortality in those days. As a result of his death it was the younger twin who succeeded to the throne as James II.

Mary, Queen of Scots

Between 18 and 24 July 1567 Mary Queen of Scots had a twin miscarriage, which has given rise to much speculation since. To appreciate the full importance of the event a little of Mary's history before it must be given.

Her first husband, Lord Darnley, had been murdered earlier that year on 10 February. In the power struggle which followed the Earl of Bothwell, who was rapidly gaining the Queen's favour, abducted her on 24 April and took her to Dunbar Castle. Three weeks later, on 15 May, Mary and Bothwell were married. This bid for power on the part of the earl aroused great opposition, and on 15 June he and the Queen, with only a small force of retainers, were confronted at Carberry Hill by a superior army raised by the nobles in opposition. Bothwell managed to escape, but Mary was taken captive, and on 17 June 1567 was imprisoned in a castle on a tiny island in the middle of Loch Leven. It was there that her miscarriage occurred. Nothing was known about it until years later when in captivity she dictated her memoirs to her French secretary, Claude Nau. He recorded that:

"On the afternoon of the . . . day . . . 1567 . . . she was lying on her bed in a state of very great weakness, partly by reason of her extreme trouble (partly in consequence of a great flux, the

MARIA SCOTICORVM REGINA
Es Patris Frederici Zuecher in Ethica Adversus
de Henricus de D. D. Barons de Gualtheri.

Mary Queen of Scots by unknown artists.

result of a miscarriage of twins, her issue by Bothwell) so that she could move only with great difficulty."

This quotation is a translation by the Jesuit priest Father Joseph Stevenson, who published Nau's *Memorials of Mary Stewart* from an original manuscript in 1883.¹² Nau had written in French but instead of writing the French word "jumeaux" for twins he had written "deux enfants." There may be nothing of importance in the avoidance of this word by Nau and "deux enfants" may merely have been chosen because the fetuses had been miscarried and not born alive.

How much pregnant would Mary Queen of Scots have to have been for her two fetuses to be evident?

The recognition of twins in the products of conception is unlikely before 12 weeks, but is perhaps just possible at that time; for two fetuses to have been recognised by the Queen's ordinary bedchamber attendants, who were all she had with her on the island at the time, a more advanced gestation seems likely.

We know when Mary and Bothwell were married—15 May—but not the precise date of the miscarriage. If we presume for the sake of argument that the date of the miscarriage had been 20 July this was 9½ weeks from the marriage so that if Mary had conceived on her wedding day the pregnancy would have been 11½ weeks advanced by the usual reckoning from her last menstrual period two weeks earlier. If the miscarriage had been on 24 July the duration of pregnancy would have been 12 weeks.

On balance, it seems more probable that during the time between 24 April, when Mary was abducted by the earl, and 15 May, when they were married, he possessed her, forcibly or otherwise, and she conceived, thus allowing the two fetuses to be seen at the subsequent miscarriage, which would then have been about 14-15 weeks of gestation. Antonia Fraser also reaches the conclusion that the Queen's conception is more likely to have been before marriage than after it.¹³

Partly because of Nau's choice of the words "deux enfants" some have inevitably suggested that Mary was much further on in pregnancy than has been indicated here. This is a very serious accusation since it would mean that she and Bothwell were cohabiting about the time of Darnley's death on 10 February, 26 weeks before the expulsion of twins, or even before this date. The evidence for this is flimsy to a degree and I would strongly support the view put forward by Lady Antonia Fraser that it "is virtually impossible . . . that the Queen could have conceived twins by Bothwell in January before Darnley's death and carried them in complete secrecy without the faintest

contemporary report of her pregnancy through the vital months following the Kirk o'Field tragedy."

Fascinating though the details are of Mary Queen of Scots' twin miscarriage, it is perhaps unlikely that had the event not taken place and had the infants been born alive, the course of history would have been changed. She was forced to abdicate in favour of her son, who became James VI of Scotland and later James I of England and who would still have inherited the throne had a younger child survived.

Had Alexander, the elder twin son of James I, survived to inherit instead of his brother James II, history might have been different; we cannot tell. But the survival of even a single child from the two twin pregnancies in England might have altered events profoundly. A live child born to Queen Anne could have allowed the Stuart line, which died with her, to continue, and the Hanoverians might never have inherited the throne. The survival of a child to Queen Adelaide would have kept Victoria from the throne and we would not now be enjoying the reign of a monarch of such admirable qualities as those of our Sovereign Lady Elizabeth II.

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