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Book Review

The Two: A Biography

By Irving Wallace and Amy Wallace. Illustrated. 415 pages, including a bibliography of primary sources. New York: Bantam Books Edition, 1979.

“Siamese twins” now refers to persons who suffer the rare condition of being physically joined identical twins and who, until recently, were not likely to survive past infancy. This biography is about the original Siamese twins, Chang and Eng, who survived without being physically separated for almost 63 years – long enough to become world-famous, produce numerous descendants in the United States, and provide a convenient term to the literature on twins.

As a story, the life of Chang and Eng is compelling. They were born during May 1811 in a rude houseboat afloat on a river near Bangkok, Siam. Their father was Chinese, their mother was three-quarters Chinese, and at the time of their birth the parents, in their thirties, had four children. Other than a midwife who fled in terror, there was no assistance at the delivery, and by present-day standards one would have hardly expected that these two small twins, the head of one between the legs of the other and joined breastbone to breastbone by a short fleshy band, would prosper. But largely through the efforts of their mother and her resistance to the life-threatening superstitions of the time, the twins prospered physically and intellectually so that by the time of their “discovery” by a Scottish trader and a Yankee sea captain, the twins contributed to the family’s income. The mother’s efforts were not easy because, as investigators of twins’ differences in personality might note, the twins had opposing temperaments. Chang, the smaller twin, was more assertive, quick-tempered, and intellectually impulsive, and Eng was mild-mannered, compliant, and intellectually reflective.

Four years after their discovery, the King of Siam permitted the twins to leave the country and they were exhibited (and exploited) until they reached age 21, when their contract expired. For the next ten years, they astutely managed their own business enough to acquire money to settle down to a farming life in Wilkesboro, North Carolina. There, in a few years, they became citizens (under the name of Bunker), bought land, built a house, and courted and married young sisters, Sallie and Adelaide Yates. Thereafter, as evidence of some kind of cooperative management of human relations, sans privacy, Chang and Adelaide produced 10 children and Eng and Sarah 12. Their descendants provide a cross-section of American society and include a president of the Union Pacific Railroad.

During the Civil War, the twins supported the Confederacy, and its defeat took so much of their capital that they resumed show business. Unfortunately, they were no longer a sensation and their tours were a testimony to their endurance. Under those conditions, Chang's temperament became more of a problem and he became a heavy drinker. In 1872, Chang suffered a stroke and, from that time on, his health as well as his personality seemed to deteriorate. At previous times, the twins had sought the best medical advice of the times regarding their physical interdependency and the possibility of surgical separation. The consensus was that separation was advised only when one of the twins died. Now that event was close, and plans were ready for emergency surgery. On January 17, 1874, when Eng awoke to find Chang dead, he was terrorized by his own predicament and died before medical help arrived.

Considered without the extensive historical material on the United States and Europe, this biography is limited by dependence on the unusual circumstances of two individuals' development under the influence of highly similar genetic and environmental forces. Despite the lack of details about the twins' thoughts, feelings, and developmental differences, one senses their individuality coming to the fore in the face of those forces. Readers with an interest in chronogenetics will also find some material of interest. By and large, *The Two* is only a casual appetizer; to obtain more, one will probably turn to other sources.

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Editor's note. Miss Helen Kirk Lauve (Galveston, Texas) has pointed out that the Hungarian twin girls described by the authors (p 19 and p 192) as united from the waist down were actually almost completely separate, being joined at the lower end of the spine.