

# COLONEL WILLIAM SEMPILL OF LOCHWINNOCH (1546-1630): A STRATEGIST FOR SPAIN\*

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## ABSTRACT

This research is the first attempt at creating a reconstruction of Colonel William Sempill of Lochwinnoch's life and career (1546-1637). Colonel Sempill achieved his place in History as the founder of the Scots College in Spain; unfortunately, he suffered the fate of a servant to a famous master, in being somewhat overshadowed by his own creation. Thus, other facets of his life, most significantly his political and military career, have been overlooked by historians. Sempill, a Scottish mercenary placed his services at the disposal of Philip II of Spain in 1582, distinguished himself in military and diplomatic affairs, particularly as Philip's envoy to James VI of Scotland to negotiate James's collaboration with the Spanish Armada. Until the end of his life, he was attached to the personal suite of the succeeding Spanish monarchs and became the most significant influence on the Spanish naval policy during the 17th century. Sempill, a militant Catholic, was distinguished by his progressive ideas concerning the struggle against Protestantism, since he always believed that re-Catholicisation should be accomplished through the education of the elite. This article is based principally on manuscript sources, many of them rarely and some of them never previously used.

**Keywords:** William Sempill of Lochwinnoch – Phillip II of Spain – James VI of Scotland – Spanish Monarchy – Spanish Armada – naval policy – diplomacy – catholicism.

## RESUMEN

La presente investigación es la primera tentativa de realizar una reconstrucción de la vida y carrera del Coronel William Sempill of Lochwinnoch (1546-1637). El coronel Sempill tiene su lugar en la Historia como fundador del Colegio de los Escoceses en España; desgraciadamente, sufre el infortunio del sirviente ante el famoso señor, siendo algo ensombrecido por su propia creación. Asimismo, otras facetas de su vida, muy especialmente su carrera política y militar, han sido dejadas de lado por los historiadores. Sempill, mercenario escocés que puso sus servicios a la disposición de Felipe II de España en 1582, se distinguió en el ejército y en los asuntos diplomáticos, especialmente como enviado de Felipe a Jacobo VI de Escocia para negociar la colaboración de Jacobo en la Armada española. Hasta el final de su vida estuvo ligado al séquito personal de los exitosos monarcas españoles y se convirtió en la influencia más significativa de la política naval española durante el siglo XVII. Sempill, católico militante, fue distinguido por sus ideas progresivas en la lucha contra el protestantismo, pues siempre creyó que la recatolización se debía alcanzar por la educación de la élite. El artículo se fundamenta principalmente en fuentes manuscritas, muchas de ellas excepcionalmente raras y algunas de ellas nunca antes utilizadas.

**Palabras clave:** William Sempill of Lochwinnoch – Felipe II de España – Jacobo VI de Escocia – Monarquía Hispánica – Armada Española – política naval – diplomacia – catolicismo.

William Sempill of Lochwinnoch (1546-1630), achieved his place in History as the founder of the Scots College in Spain, which stands to this day. Unfortunately, other facets of his life, most significantly his political and military career, have been overlooked by historians. Sempill, a Scottish mercenary in the service of the Prince of

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\* **Note of the Editor:** In the «Supplementary Files» section of the current article's HTML version there is available a portrait of William Sempill of Lochwinnoch from Scots College in Spain.

Orange since 1568, betrayed his garrison in Liere in 1582 and placed his services at the disposal of Philip II of Spain, under whom he distinguished himself in military and diplomatic affairs, particularly as Philip's envoy to James VI of Scotland to negotiate James's collaboration with the Spanish Armada. Until the end of his life, he was attached to the personal suite of the succeeding Spanish monarchs and became the most significant influence on the Spanish naval policy during the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Having become a naturalised Spanish subject, he founded the Scottish College in Madrid in 1627, entrusting its administration to the Jesuits. Sempill, a militant Catholic, was distinguished by his progressive ideas concerning the struggle against Protestantism, since he always believed that the re-Catholisation of the British Isles should be accomplished through the education of its elite.

This research is the first attempt at creating a reconstruction of Colonel William Sempill's life and career. Sempill suffered the fate of a servant to a famous master, in being somewhat overshadowed not only by those he advised, but also by his own renowned creation, the Scots College in Spain. Although few historians have widened their scope by including Sempill's military and political life in their works of the Scots College – for example, Maurice Taylor and his *The Scots College in Spain* – there has been little beyond Fernandez Duro's *La Armada Invencible* (Madrid, 1884), who described Sempill merely as an agent of Philip II during the period of the Great Armada.<sup>2</sup> Both works were based on the Spanish state papers, but none had consulted Sempill's personal letters, which have proven elusive.

When Rev. John Geddes (later to be Vicar Apostolic of the Lowland District in Scotland) transferred the Scots College from Madrid to Valladolid in 1771, he obtained possession of some "fifty bundles of papers" which he carried with him to Blairs College, in Aberdeen. These manuscripts contained quite a number of papers belonging to Sempill. Together with deeds of foundation, financial statements of rents, burdens and transactions, there were over thirty personal letters, various drafts of memorials, letters of introduction, and passports.<sup>3</sup> Three decades ago, these documents were moved to the Scottish Catholic Archives, in Edinburgh, where they have been catalogued under "Colleges Abroad", misleading researchers. Apart from the Scottish Catholic Archives, another four archives have been used for this research: the National Library of Scotland, the British Library, the Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid and the Public Record Office. Thus, this study, based principally on manuscript sources and especially on William Sempill's own letters, intends to offer an in depth study of the figure of the Colonel and his influence on not only Spanish, but European, diplomatic, political and military history.

In fact, William Sempill, born in Lochwinnoch in 1546, was son, perhaps illegitimately,<sup>4</sup> of Robert, third Earl Sempill. During his adolescence, he belonged to the household of Mary, Queen of Scots. After the Battle of Langside and Mary's flight to England, he left Scotland for the Low Countries and accepted a commission in the service of the Prince of Orange. For some years, therefore, he fought with the rebel

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Archivo General de Simancas, Sempill, "On the necessity of having a strong navy", 1625, CE 8-II-1625; see also R. A. STRADLING, *The Armada of Flanders: Spanish maritime policy and European war, 1568-1668*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> C. FERNÁNDEZ DURO, *La Armada Invencible*, vol. 1, Madrid, Sucesores de Rivadeneyra, 1884-1885, pp. 158-159.

<sup>3</sup> W. MCGOLDRICK, "The Scots College, Madrid" in *Innes Review*, vol. 4, 1953, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, London, Oxford University Press, vol. 17, 1975, p. 1177.

forces against Spain.<sup>5</sup> In 1573, George Lord Seton and his younger son, John, who were in the Netherlands trying to secure Spanish aid for the Scottish Queen, were able to persuade Sempill to pass into the service of Spain and, thereby, assist in maintaining secret contacts between Phillip II and Mary and her supporters.<sup>6</sup> Taylor claimed that “unable to resist such an appeal to his loyalty for his queen, he conscientiously obeyed and dedicated the rest of his life to the task”.<sup>7</sup> Duro also affirmed that Sempill entered into the service Spain in 1573 by order of Mary Stewart.<sup>8</sup> However, as the new evidence reveals, during the next eight to nine years he played both sides as a double agent.<sup>9</sup> He remained in the Low Countries serving the rebel forces as captain of a Scottish regiment in Liere,<sup>10</sup> whilst he was in illicit secret communication with the Spanish «gobernador general», Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma.<sup>11</sup> On 25 March 1582, Sempill, after not having been paid in excess of ten weeks, betrayed his garrison, delivered the town to Parma and offered himself for the subjection of Philip II.<sup>12</sup> Liere was not a large place, but it had strategic significance; it was regarded as “the bulwark of Antwerp and the key of Brabant”.<sup>13</sup> In recompense for these services, Parma offered him 70,000 ducats<sup>14</sup> and sent him to Spain to collect a reward of 2,000 ducats to be given by Philip, himself.<sup>15</sup> Sempill tells us that he declined the reward replying that, while his own money lasted, he was content to know that he had served the King.<sup>16</sup> At Parma’s request, he made his way to Spain, where he could also explain to Philip how important “it was to use Scotland against England”.<sup>17</sup>

Sempill arrived in Spain at the end of April 1583, full of hopes of obtaining Philip’s assistance for Mary and the Catholics of that nation.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, the Spanish monarch was preoccupied with a rebellion in Portugal and did not have time to see him.<sup>19</sup> However, the Captain did not waste his time at the Spanish court, whilst he was waiting to obtain an interview with Philip, he met with Cardinal Granvelle,

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<sup>5</sup> M. TAYLOR, *The Scots College in Spain*, Valladolid, Real Colegio de Escoceses, 1971, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> National Library of Scotland, “Historie of Scotland, since the death of King James the first until the death of King James the sixth”, ADV MS 35.5.3.

<sup>7</sup> TAYLOR, *The Scots College* [...], op. cit., p. 18

<sup>8</sup> DURO, *Armada*, [...], op. cit., 1, p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> Scottish Catholic Archives, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, ff. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> National Library of Scotland, “Historie of Scotland” 1587, ADV MS 35.5.3.

<sup>11</sup> SCA, “Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill”, 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 1.

<sup>12</sup> SCA, “Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill”, 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, ff. 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> NLS, “Historie of Scotland, since the death of King James the first until the death of King James the sixth,” 1587, ADV MS 35.5.3.

<sup>14</sup> Rev. W. FORBES-LEITH, *Narratives of Scottish Catholics under Mary Stuart and James VI: now first printed from the original manuscripts in the secret archives of the Vatican and other collections*, London, William Paterson, 1889, p. 368.

<sup>15</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 1.

<sup>16</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 1b.

<sup>17</sup> TAYLOR, *The Scots College*, [...], op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, ff. 1-1b.

<sup>19</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 1b.

Secretary of State and probably the closest person to the King at this time.<sup>20</sup> Granvelle, who was very impressed with the determination and intelligence of the Captain, subsequently wrote a memorandum, on 9 November, recommending the King to grant an audience to Sempill.<sup>21</sup>

Three months elapsed before the interview between Philip and Sempill took place; the Spanish King was as impressed as his minister, and decided that Sempill would be ideal as the new intelligencer with the mission to work as the key informant in the British Isles.<sup>22</sup> If he was going to stay in Spain and accept his appointment, a net of agents in Scotland was needed. The documents in the Scottish Catholic Archives reveals that Robert Graham of Fintry – a declared Catholic and nephew to James Beaton, the Bishop of Glasgow – and Robert Bruce – an active spy for Spain – were chosen; Fintry, by the Scottish Catholic nobility, and Bruce, by Philip himself.<sup>23</sup> Both would send their reports to Sempill, who by now had already settled at the Spanish court.<sup>24</sup> The Scottish nobility immediately sent Bruce to Spain to collect 5,040 ducats,<sup>25</sup> which would be kept safely in Scotland to be used at a “special time”;<sup>26</sup> this being the so-called enterprise of England.

The pacification of Portugal in May 1583 had had profound political and indeed psychological importance for Philip, bringing about a dramatic rescheduling of his priorities in foreign affairs. Of course, Philip still had the rebellious Netherlands on his hands, but there were disturbing signs that he might be on his way to committing himself to the “Enterprise of England”. Scotland’s strategic position as England’s Achilles’ heel, and the religious struggle within the realm was likely to lead to interference by the European Catholic powers, an opportunity that Spain did not dare to miss. Despite Scotland’s apparent remoteness, tucked away in the north-west corner of the British Isles, curiously, it was her strategic geographic position as a natural stepping-stone to England that gave her significance. Philip was tremendously concerned with restoring Catholicism to the British Isles, but he also knew that instability inside them, could mean the end of English aid to the rebels in the Netherlands and a cessation of the English piracy of the Spanish Atlantic fleet. Moreover, Scotland could be used as a secure base in the North Sea.<sup>27</sup>

Sempill, by now colonel, decided to stay in the Spanish court waiting for an opportunity not only to advise the King, but to take a more active role.<sup>28</sup> His great chance came when in early January 1587, he and Captain Baustista Piatti, an engineer

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<sup>20</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 2.

<sup>21</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 2b.

<sup>22</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, ff. 2b-3.

<sup>23</sup> SCA, “Colonel Sempill: representation of Scottish affairs”, 15 Mar. 1630, CA4/5/16, f. 1.

<sup>24</sup> SCA, “Colonel Sempill: representation of Scottish affairs”, 15 Mar. 1630, CA4/5/16, f. 1b.

<sup>25</sup> See also SCA, “Diverse documents of W. Sempill”, without date, CA4/5/20, f. 1; SCA, “Memorial presented by Colonel Sempill to the King of Spain”, Jun. 1631, CA4/6/5, ff. 1-3; SCA, Andrés de Rocas to Colonel W. Sempill, Feb. 1632, CA4/7/2, ff. 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> SCA, “Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill”, 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 1.

<sup>27</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 1.

<sup>28</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 3.

from Milan, were appointed by Philip to create maps of the coast of the British Isles for the enterprise.<sup>29</sup> Sempill was unsuccessfully attempting to dissuade Philip against the Armada, whilst, at the same time, trying to gain the position as the official adviser for British affairs in the Spanish court.<sup>30</sup> The Colonel feared that the Spanish invasion of the British Isles could be seen by the Pope and Catholics everywhere as Philip's pan-European expansionism and insisted that the same results could be achieved with less expenditure and without the risk of failure of such a large Armada lacking a friendly port at which to land. He advised Phillip to pursue the English commerce and instigate an indirect war against England, taking advantage of the intelligence in Scotland by sending missionaries to preach to the nobility.<sup>31</sup> Thus, once their collaboration was secured, he proposed to provide the Scottish nobles with money and weapons to start a war and then use the Isle of Wight as base for the Armada to launch a more secure invasion.<sup>32</sup>

Philip was not dissuaded, but decided to send Sempill to Paris to serve Mendoza and advise him and Parma on his dealings with the Scottish Catholic nobles in light of the proposed enterprise against England.<sup>33</sup> Even though Sempill was now away from the court, with Mendoza and Parma being amongst the chief architects behind the proposed invasion, Sempill's intelligence and opinions still had a direct influence on the planning process. In November 1587, before his arrival, Philip wrote to Mendoza, warning him to be cautious in dealing with Sempill, as, in spite of his apparent zeal, he was nevertheless "very Scotch".<sup>34</sup> He arrived in Paris in mid-December,<sup>35</sup> and not had a complete month passed, when Mendoza reported to Philip that he found Sempill more trustworthy than most Scotsmen of either sword or gown.<sup>36</sup> As a consequence, the Colonel was busily employed in the secret negotiations then being carried out with the Catholic nobles of Scotland.<sup>37</sup>

It is clear from Sempill's own letters that although he was not supportive of an armada, he also knew that the conversion of the British Isles to Catholicism could only be achieved by a Spanish invasion at this time. Thus, in many of his letters, he deceived the English and Scottish Catholics exiled in Paris, who still believed that it could be obtained by James VI's conversion.<sup>38</sup> Sempill's open opposition to the Scottish candidature to the English throne gained him many enemies not only

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<sup>29</sup> DURO, *Armada*, [...], op. cit., 1, pp. 33, 158.

<sup>30</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, "Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain", early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 3.

<sup>31</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, "Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain", early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 3b.

<sup>32</sup> DURO, *Armada*, [...], op. cit., 1, pp. 158-159.

<sup>33</sup> Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid, "Documentos Diversos", est. H, cod. 50, f. 469; FERNÁNDEZ DE NAVARRETE, *Biblioteca Marítima Española*, vol. 1, Madrid, Viuda de Calero, 1851, p. 608.

<sup>34</sup> Philip II to Don Bernardino de Mendoza, 27 Nov. 1587. A. TEULET, *Relations politiques de la France et de l'Espagne avec l'Ecosse au XVI siècle*, vol. V, Paris, 1862, pp. 504-9; see also *DNB*, xvii, p. 1177.

<sup>35</sup> Don Bernardino de Mendoza to Philip II, 22 Dec. 1587. TEULET, *Relations*, [...], op. cit., v, pp. 510-5; their friendship was long lasting, as it can be seen in SCA, "Don Bernardino de Mendoza, former Spanish ambassador in London: attestation in favor of Colonel Sempill", 24 Apr. 1602, CA4/1/17, f. 1.

<sup>36</sup> SCA, "Don Bernardino de Mendoza, former Spanish ambassador in London: attestation in favor of Colonel Sempill", 24 Apr. 1602, CA4/1/17, ff. 1-2.

<sup>37</sup> Don Bernardino de Mendoza to Philip II, 22 Dec. 1587. TEULET, *Relations*, [...], op. cit., pp. 510-5.

<sup>38</sup> SCA, "Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill", 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 2; BNM "Diverse documents", ed. H, cod. 50, f. 469.

amongst the leaders of the Catholics exiled in Paris, Lord Paget and Thomas Morgan, but even among the Scottish Jesuits, as for example Father William Crichton, and some Scottish Catholic nobles, such as the earl of Huntly, who was a close friend of James VI. Thus, it was rather surprising that, when at the end of January 1588 Lord Maxwell arrived in Paris to try to convince Mendoza of James VI's good disposition towards Catholicism, the Spanish ambassador decided that Sempill should go to Scotland in a final attempt to persuade James to join Spain in the enterprise.<sup>39</sup>

Merely a month before the Armada was launched, Sempill and Maxwell set sail for Scotland, landing in Dundee in late July.<sup>40</sup> Immediately upon arrival, Sempill organised a meeting with the Scottish Catholic nobility in Glasgow.<sup>41</sup> The evidence indicates that he had been led to believe that a Spanish army would be welcomed in the realm, since his sources, mainly Scottish missionaries, had assured him that over half of the population of Scotland were Catholics.<sup>42</sup> However, as he wrote, he immediately found it apparent that there was no united Catholic party in Scotland and that the number of Catholics in the realm given by the missionaries was far from reality.<sup>43</sup> The Spanish diplomatic and political threat to England, Scotland and Protestantism was less extreme than he might have supposed because the power of Catholicism in Scotland had been weakened so by internal dissensions.<sup>44</sup> Sempill and Maxwell had to convince the Scottish lords to wait until the Armada reached Scotland and then, and only then, create a diversion by taking up arms and seizing the port of Leith.<sup>45</sup> Sempill carried with him 500 gold ducats, which would pay for 300 men for the proposed revolt.<sup>46</sup> Maxwell believed that the Armada would not sail, and proposed that the Scots seize the initiative themselves. But many others knew that without Spanish support such a plot was impossible and dismissed his opinion.<sup>47</sup>

Secretly, Sempill had already met with Sorley Boy Macdonnell,<sup>48</sup> Hugh O'Neil and Rory O'Donnell, leaders of the Irish discontents.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the threat of revolt in Scotland was boosted by the presence of the Jesuit Father William Chisholm – the

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<sup>39</sup> K. BROWN, "The Making of a *Politique*: the Counter-Reformation and the regional politics of John, eighth Lord Maxwell" in *Scottish History Records*, vol. lxvi, 1987, p. 164.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.

<sup>41</sup> *Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots, 1547-1603*, vol. IX, Edinburgh, Boyd, 1898-1969, p. 482.

<sup>42</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, "Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain", early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 2.

<sup>43</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, "Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain", early seventeenth century, CA4 /9/10, f. 2b.

<sup>44</sup> Apart from these ecclesiastical and political differences the Roman Catholic strength in Scotland was limited by the claims of kinship and feud. The Lindsays and the Ogilvies both sympathised with Roman Catholicism, but they were rivals of Angus and their rivalry sometimes took violent form. *CSP Scot.*, xiii, ii, pp. 649-50; SCA, Sempill to Philip III, "Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain", early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 3.

<sup>45</sup> BROWN, "The Making of a *Politique*", [...], op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>46</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, "Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain", early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 3b; the 500 gold ducats were given to him by Andrés de Alba, from Alava, in Spain; a married businessman living at the time in Rouen. SCA, "Letter of Colonel William Sempill to the Count-Duke of San Lucas on Scots affairs", 28 Sept. 1627, CA4/4/20, f. 1.

<sup>47</sup> BROWN, "The Making of a *Politique*", [...], op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>48</sup> See J. M. HILL, *Fire and Sword: Sorley Boy MacDonnell and the rise of Clan Ian Mor, 1538-1590*, London, Athlone Press, 1993.

<sup>49</sup> DURO, *Armada*, [...], op. cit., 2, p. 159.

bishop of Dunblane – who had been sent by Parma to assist Sempill in his dealings in that realm and with the preparations for the approach of the Armada.<sup>50</sup> On 5 August, Huntly wrote to Parma urging for the enterprise and complaining of the sluggishness of the “Spanish resolutions”.<sup>51</sup>

While the Scottish Catholic noblemen were being seized by anxiety, Sempill was trying to obtain an interview with James VI.<sup>52</sup> Duro claimed that Sempill was sent as a special envoy of the Spanish King to offer him 42,000 gold ducats for revenging the death of his mother.<sup>53</sup> Father George Conn, however, suggested that the Spanish monarch’s final intention was to dispatch an agent to the Scottish King in order to carry out negotiations for the intended marriage of James with the Spanish *Infanta*.<sup>54</sup> In fact, Sempill tells us that he had been sent with two commissions, a public one for James, and a secret commission “to be used for the benefit of the Spanish crown, to lead the nobility when the army from Flanders would come into the island”.<sup>55</sup>

The actual public and the secret letters of commission that Sempill carried from Philip II to James VI which are among Sempill’s letters in the Scottish Catholic Archives. The secret commission is, in political terms, much more interesting, since there are two documents that the Colonel denoted as secret commissions from Philip to negotiate with James before the arrival of the Armada.<sup>56</sup>

The first secret letter of commission had seven clauses for James: the first one was that he should renounce any right – civil, divine or by conquest – that he would have to the crowns of England and Ireland. In return, Philip would compensate him with 100,000 ducats before the beginning the Spanish invasion of England. In addition, during the said war there would be sent 12,000 paid and armed soldiers, or a combination of troops and money, or even money alone, depending on Philip’s desire. Also, Philip would have an ambassador in Scotland to deal with issues of war or peace.<sup>57</sup>

The second letter was more focussed on religious matters. Its first, and most important, clause was the conversion of James and his realm to Catholicism; thus, pardoning the Catholics in his realm, calling those from exile to return and restoring their goods, estates and honours. In addition, he would grant liberty of conscience and protect all the English Catholics who would pass to his country.<sup>58</sup> Politically, James would have to sign a defensive and offensive league with Philip; and wage war against Elizabeth in Scotland, England, and Ireland. For this, he would give order for

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<sup>50</sup> *CSP Scot.*, ix, p. 507; William Chisholm had left years ago his bishopric of Dunblane to become a monk under Carthusian order, but had been sent back to Scotland in the late 1580s by the Pope Sixtus V.

<sup>51</sup> BROWN, “The Making of a *Politique*” [...], op. cit., p. 168.

<sup>52</sup> SCA, “Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill”, 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 1.

<sup>53</sup> DURO, *Armada*, [...], op. cit., 1, p. 159.

<sup>54</sup> *DNB*, xvii, p. 1177; on this matter see BL, “Raisons et considerations sur le mariage futur du Roy d’Ecosse”, Add. MS 36,530, f. 4.

<sup>55</sup> SCA, “Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill”, 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 1; Sempill kept among his papers also drafts of the commission to James VI. SCA, “Letters for the King of Scotland about the commission and for the protection of Colonel Sempill”, May 1588, CA4/1/4, ff. 1-3; SCA, “James by the Grace of God King of Scottish to all sundrie [...]” 1588, CA4/1/5.

<sup>56</sup> SCA, “Diverse documents of W. Sempill”, 1587, CA4/10/10.

<sup>57</sup> SCA, “Offers of the King of Scotland to His Catholic Majesty”, without date, CA4/9/16.

<sup>58</sup> SCA, “Offers of the King of Scotland to His Catholic Majesty”, without date, CA4/9/15, f. 1.

all the Scottish soldiers, captains, pilots and men of war in general, serving in Holland and Zeeland, to abandon the English and all the other enemies of Spain. James would also have to help Spain with 10,000 paid soldiers in the war in Flanders. Thus, James would send two noblemen from his kingdom as ambassadors, to reside in Spain and Flanders. Once the war in those lands was finished, he would aid, with the same number of men, in the war against the Turks. Finally, James would have to pledge his future son to be carried to Spain.<sup>59</sup>

The reports of the English intelligence system did not shed much light on the aims of the final secret commission given to Sempill. Yet, William Asheby informed Sir Francis Walsingham that “the offers of the Spaniards are great – to give him pay for 20,000 footmen and 5,000 horses”.<sup>60</sup> This seems to point towards the first commission, as it was of a more military and political nature. Unfortunately, there is no record now of what was said in this meeting between James and Sempill. Duro affirmed that the King, trying to gain the assistance of Sempill, promised him the earldom of the Hebrides, but he never mentioned such offer when relating his meeting with the King of Scotland.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, just after their interview, word reached the country of the failure of the Armada; as a result, James refused Philip’s offers, or exigencies, which had been presented by Sempill and ordered his arrest.<sup>62</sup>

By 10 August, the Spanish fleet was beaten, but the fear of the invasion was still casting a shadow on a confusing time in Scotland. It was believed that the Armada was going to “bend there course to some part of Scotland and joyne with the northern lordes, which are combined together, and have had intelligence along tyme with the Prince of Parma, beyng solicited by Coronall Simple of this countrey”.<sup>63</sup> On 12 August, Elizabeth was informed that a cockboat had landed in Scotland with twelve Spaniards who were conveyed to meet with Sempill in Edinburgh,<sup>64</sup> with the intention of forcing James VI to leave his country.<sup>65</sup> Once in the burgh, the Spaniards had a conference with Sempill, but this secret interview was discovered. They were arrested and put under ward. Once in prison, they confessed that there were 100 soldiers with victuals and munitions in their ship. Sempill escaped and took to the road in great haste for the house of the earl of Bothwell, in Creighton, eight miles from Edinburgh. Sir James Carmichael pursued, apprehended him, and brought him back to Edinburgh to be examined by the Council. James VI decided to commit Sempill to the same prison as Maxwell was imprisoned in after his rebellion of the previous May, and subsequently committed Maxwell to the Black Ness.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> SCA, “Offers of the King of Scotland to His Catholic Majesty”, without date, CA4/9/15, ff. 1-2.

<sup>60</sup> BL, William Asheby to Francis Walsingham, 3 Aug. 1588, Cott. MS Calig. D.I., f. 257; *CSP Scot.*, ix, pp. 589-91

<sup>61</sup> DURO, *Armada*, [...], op. cit., 2, p. 159; SCA, “Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill”, 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 1b.

<sup>62</sup> Fernández de Navarrete wrote that the King of Scotland ordered Sempill’s arrest “to behead him”. FERNÁNDEZ DE NAVARRETE, *Biblioteca Marítima Española*, [...], op. cit., i, p. 608.

<sup>63</sup> *CSP Scot.*, ix, p. 593.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, ix, p. 594.

<sup>65</sup> Lord H. Seymour to the Council, 16 Aug. 1588. LAUGHTON, J.K.: *State Papers relating to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada, anno 1588*. London. Ed. Navy Record Society. 1894, p. 120.

<sup>66</sup> BL, Sir Henry Woddryngton to Hunsdon, Cott. MS Calig. D.I., f. 276; *CSP Scot.*, ix, pp. 595-6; Calendar of Letters and State Papers relating to English Affairs, preserved principally in the Archives of Simancas. Vol. iv. London. Ed. M.A.S. Hume. 1892-1899, pp. 405, 425.

Sempill was imprisoned in an uppermost apartment of a seven storey house in the Grassmarket in Edinburgh, owned by one Robert Gourlay,<sup>67</sup> and was under the vigilance of four sentinels who remained at all times with him in the room.<sup>68</sup> Obviously, any diplomatic immunity, which he had previously enjoyed, was removed. Parma, without any scruple, did not hesitate in leaving the agent without any support, despite their long relationship.<sup>69</sup> Parma sent a letter to James VI concerning Colonel Sempill and his behaviour in Scotland, alleging “he dealt further than he had commission”.<sup>70</sup>

Later on in his life, the Colonel left a very romantic account of his epic escape among his documents. According to Sempill, plans were made to extract a confession from him that might implicate many Scottish Catholics, but, before that could take place, he escaped, with the aid of the Earl of Huntly, Robert Bruce and Sempill’s own sister, Helen Sempill – the Countess of Ross.<sup>71</sup> According to him, Helen sent him by means of a trusty servant what appeared to be three large pies, forewarning him that only two were in reality pies, and being the third one a silken cord covered with paste. The servant informed him that he was condemned to die on the following day, after being made to suffer the torture of the boot, to make him denounce his accomplices; that in consequence, if he wished to save his life, it was necessary that he should make his escape by the window of the prison that night, and that he would find horses ready at the South Gate. He knew how to avail himself of this means of escape. At night-fall, he divided the two pies among the soldiers, and, for this kindness, they consented to leave him alone while he said his accustomed prayers; he immediately fastened his door, placed his bedstead at the window, and having tied the cord to it, and put on his gloves, he began to descend. On account of his corpulence and the extreme thinness of the cord, his flesh was cut causing the most acute pain, and he was on the verge of abandoning the cord and letting himself fall to the ground, when his foot struck upon a balcony. After resting upon it for a short time, he reached the ground in safety. He now found himself in a garden, the wall of which, on account of the inequality of the ground, was low inside, but higher away from the building. Before him was the Grassmarket, guarded by soldiers. In this difficulty, with great presence of mind and assisted by the darkness of the night, he resolved to act the drunkard, and throwing himself into a pool which adjoined the enclosure, he purposely besmeared his clothes and face, and bespattered the soldiers with mud; they believed him to be drunk, and after a few kicks allowed him to pass.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> TAYLOR, *The Scots College*, [...], op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>68</sup> FORBES-LEITH, *Narratives*, [...], op. cit., p. 369.

<sup>69</sup> It should be noted that after this affair was past, Parma recommended Philip II of Spain to award Sempill with the habit of the Order of Santiago for his merits in Scottish affairs. FERNÁNDEZ DE NAVARRETE, *Biblioteca Marítima Española*, [...], op. cit., i, p. 609.

<sup>70</sup> SCA, “Letters of Duke of Parma to the King of Scotland touching the commission of the Colonel Sempill, his prison and the response of the King to the Duke and a safe-conduct of the King signed and stamped by his stamp”, without date, CA4/9/12, f. 1; *CSP Scot.*, ix, p. 653.

<sup>71</sup> On 15 July 1602, the King of Spain gave order to Andres de Prada to make a license that of the 800 ducats that were the salary of Colonel Sempill, 300 of them would be sent from that day onwards to his daughter, Helen Sempill – in exile in Brussels – for the rest of her life, event after the Colonel’s death. SCA, “Diverse documents of W. Sempill”, without date, CA4/2/5, f. 1; FORBES-LEITH, *Narratives*, [...], op. cit., p. 368.

<sup>72</sup> SCA, “Diverse documents of W. Sempill”, without date, CA 4/2/5, ff. 1-2; FORBES-LEITH, *Narratives*, p. 369.

After Sempill's escape from custody, an order was issued on 20 August by the Privy Council of Scotland against the Colonel, "who had come on a pretended mission from the Prince of Parma and had been trafficking treasonably with His Majesty's subjects".<sup>73</sup> Sempill was able to avoid his persecutors, and just before departing from Scotland, met part of the nobility, notably Huntly, Errol – who was at the time Constable of Scotland – and Lord Hamilton – a protestant but friend of Mary Queen of Scot's.<sup>74</sup> Of the 500 gold ducats that the Colonel had carried with him, 100 ducats were given to Hugh O'Neil and Rory O'Donnell.<sup>75</sup> Another 20 ducats were given to "trustworthy friends" to be used "to buy people close to the Earl of Bothwell, Admiral of Scotland and cousin of the King, to covert him to Catholicism".<sup>76</sup> Fintry and Bruce would continue as intermediaries for the correspondence between Spain and the Scottish Catholic nobility.<sup>77</sup> According to Sempill, in the same meeting, it was also agreed that letters signed by the Catholic nobles would be substituted by ciphered letters, with a code that was designed by Sempill himself before he left Scotland, or that in grave occasions, Fintry or Bruce would go in person to Spain or the Low Countries with a letter of reference.<sup>78</sup>

When Sempill arrived at Flanders, he visited Parma. He wanted to make sure that if James VI decided to arrest the Catholic nobility there, the same amount of money that had been provided by Mendoza and the Duke of Alba years before – 5,040 ducats – would be sent again to Scotland.<sup>79</sup> Sempill had understood that Parma's actions when the Armada were politically correct, but he felt deceived. Immediately after their interview he returned to Madrid, to take up his prior role as an agent, carrying with him Parma's commendation and request for suitable reward.<sup>80</sup>

Once in Madrid, with Sempill as the coordinator, the net of espionage seemed to work perfectly. In dealing with his agents Sempill had always exercised great care. They made use of ciphered letters, which he normally decrypted in person. However, even coded letters did not prevent the secret correspondence from being discovered. On 27 February 1589, Thomas Pringle – Sempill's servant – was arrested in England with several letters from some Scottish Catholic earls. Immediately, Elizabeth informed James of the treasonable correspondence maintained by some of his subjects.<sup>81</sup> At the end of February, the Privy Council of Scotland delivered to the English ambassador a collection of deciphered letters that had been seized from a Scottish man, who was suspected of trying to carry them to Parma and Philip II.<sup>82</sup> The letters were from Errol, Huntly, Crawford, Maxwell, Claude Hamilton and Bruce regretting the failure of the Spanish Armada a year before and offering, if aided by 6,000 Spaniards, to co-operate in a new invasion of England.<sup>83</sup> Whilst being

<sup>73</sup> *CSP Scot.*, ix, p. 654.

<sup>74</sup> SCA, "Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill", 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, ff. 1-2.

<sup>75</sup> SCA, "Letter of Colonel William Sempill to the Count-Duke of San Lucas on Scots affairs", 28 Sept. 1627, CA4/4/20, f. 1b.

<sup>76</sup> SCA, "Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill", Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, ff. 1-2.

<sup>77</sup> SCA, "Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill", 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 2.

<sup>78</sup> SCA, "Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill", 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 2b.

<sup>79</sup> SCA, "Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill", 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 2b.

<sup>80</sup> TAYLOR, *The Scots College*, [...], op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>81</sup> *CSP Scot.*, ix, p. 698.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, ix, pp. 682-3; *The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, vol. Iv, Edinburgh, J.H. Burton, 1877-98, pp. 821-822.

<sup>83</sup> *CSP Scot.*, ix, 682-97; *RPC*, iv, 361, 821-2.

interrogated by Walsingham, Pringle confessed that Sempill had dispatched him from Flanders six weeks prior.<sup>84</sup>

The first enclosure was a collective letter of the “Scottish Lords to the King of Spain”, dated 14 January 1589, and written in French in which, after expressing their regret for the failure of the Armada, they solicited Philip II to renew his invasion of the Isle by way of Scotland, assuring that with the aid of 6,000 Spanish soldiers and money, within six weeks of their arrival they should be well advanced inside England; and they would quickly have completed the invasion of the Isle. Finally, they claimed that Sempill knew all the details of this plan.<sup>85</sup> The second letter was a long dispatch from Bruce to Parma, dated 24 January 1589. Bruce confirmed Parma’s delivery of 6,272 crowns and 3,700 pistols by Father Chisholm.<sup>86</sup> Part of the money was given to Lord Livingston, and the rest was kept in Edinburgh to aid, if needed, the Catholic nobles. Moreover, Bruce declared that Bothwell, although Protestant, was “extremely desirous to aid you against England”, assuring that Bothwell had offered to leave his country in order to offer himself to Parma, and afterwards to Philip.<sup>87</sup> The next letter was a response from Huntly to Parma’s letter sent with Father Chisholm, on 13 October 1588.<sup>88</sup> There was, also, a letter from Errol to Parma, asking him “to assure him [Philip II] on my behalf that he has no servant in this land more devoted than I”.<sup>89</sup> The last two enclosures were directed to Sempill; the first letter by Chisholm.<sup>90</sup>

On 21 March, the Privy Council, convening at Holyroodhouse, issued a summons for Fintry, who was also suspected of being involved.<sup>91</sup> Fintry and Pringle were imprisoned and as a result the Spanish net of intelligence in Scotland was not completely broken, but seriously damaged. On 24 May 1589, Huntly, Bothwell and Crawford were charged with trafficking with Sempill, Bruce, Hay, and Crichton from whom “they had received foreign money to execute some treasonable practise against the presente state”.<sup>92</sup>

Sempill was requested by the Catholic nobility of Scotland to go with a commission to Philip to Spain. Firstly, Sempill had to declare the little hope that there was that of James’s Catholic conversion. He himself believed that James “had consent the martyrdom of his own mother”.<sup>93</sup> Thus, he had to remind Philip of the importance of Scotland for being able to move against England. Subsequently, he had to make a study of the ports, beaches or any other places where an army could disembark; how

<sup>84</sup> SCA, “Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill”, 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 3.

<sup>85</sup> *CSP Scot.*, ix, pp. 684-5.

<sup>86</sup> However, the Privy Council reported that “Bruce hath received divers sums of money [apart from his pension by the King of Spain of 40 ducats per month], and lately 10,000 ducats by Chishome, and looketh for more from the Duke, to be distributed among the Catholic nobility or employed for some great enterprise in Scotland, with the assistance of the Spanish forces”. See third enclosure. *CSP Scot.*, ix, pp. 686-91.

<sup>87</sup> Public Record Office, “King of Spain’s forces in the Low Countries”, 1590, SP 77/5, f. 1; *CSP Scot.*, ix, pp. 689-91.

<sup>88</sup> PRO, “King of Spain’s forces in the Low Countries”, 1590, SP 77/5, f. 2; *CSP Scot.*, ix, pp. 692-3.

<sup>89</sup> PRO, “King of Spain’s forces in the Low Countries”, 1590, SP 77/5, f. 3; *CSP Scot.*, ix, p. 693.

<sup>90</sup> PRO, “King of Spain’s forces in the Low Countries”, 1590, SP 77/5, f. 4; *CSP Scot.*, ix, p. 694.

<sup>91</sup> *RPC*, iv, pp. 360, 820-1, 367; *CSP*, x, pp. 10-13; incriminating letters from Huntly and Errol to Parma, written on 24 January 1589, are recorded in PRO, SP77/5, f. 2.

<sup>92</sup> *CSP Scot.*, x, p. 83.

<sup>93</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 2.

money – especially for Bothwell – as well as weapons and munitions could be sent without being intercepted by the English.<sup>94</sup>

At the beginning of June, Sempill and Bruce decided to travel to the Spanish court, to try to convince Philip that a new armada was needed, while Boyd and Crichton would similarly approach Parma in the Netherlands.<sup>95</sup> Due to the death of Cardinal Granvelle, Sempill was remitted to don Cristobal de Moura, who ordered him to accompany Philip to Tarazona as an adviser.<sup>96</sup> Parma was more anxious than the Spanish King for new action in Scotland. Philip was not convinced, and believed that more information was needed, before taking such a drastic decision.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, Sempill presented an unrealistic plan to Philip on “the estate of the Catholic religion in the kingdom on Scotland”, which proposed invading the kingdom with 3,000 men who would land in Orkney.<sup>98</sup> Once there, Sempill assured:

Para esta empresa no sera menester mas de tres mil hombres de socorro que abran de desembarcar en las yslas de orhnay las quales siendo fuertes de suyo se podran hazer en poco tiempo imprenables de mas de que son fertiles y abundantes de todas cosas necesarias para el sustento del numero sobre dicho y muy cercanas de las fuerças de los de mas principales y poderosos catolicos de escoçia entre los quales es el conde de Cathenes mi hermano ques siglear de todas las tierras de Cathenas que son mas çerca de las yslas de orknay y puede acudirnos con quatro mill hombres.<sup>99</sup>

Once both armies united, they would pass into the Firth of Forth, which according to Sempill, would be impossible for the enemy to cross with cavalry or infantry because of its great volume of water, thus, they would be forced to enter through the mountain of Athol, which could easily be defended. Consequently, he pointed out that there were several advantages to the plan: firstly, that liberty of conscience would be granted for the Catholics; secondly, the expenses provoked to the Protestants by the levy of their army would not allow them to aid the rebels in the Netherlands, nor attack the Spanish fleet coming from America; and finally, and more importantly, once Elizabeth died, Philip would be the only successor to her crown.<sup>100</sup>

This over optimistic plan was the response to Philip’s declining interest in Scotland. The Spanish King had clearly expressed his reticence to send a new armada against England via Scotland without native support inside the realm; moreover, Ireland was proving a more appealing route. But the riots of 1591 in Madrid, Toledo and Seville became Philip’s priority.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>94</sup> SCA, “Instruction for C. William Sempill from the Duke of Parma”, 12 Nov. 1589, CA4/1/6, f. 1.

<sup>95</sup> SCA, “Instruction for C. William Sempill from the Duke of Parma”, 12 Nov. 1589, CA4/1/6, ff. 1-2.

<sup>96</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 2.

<sup>97</sup> SCA, “Instruction for C. William Sempill from the Duke of Parma”, 12 Nov. 1589, CA4/1/6, f. 2.

<sup>98</sup> SCA, Sempill to Philip III, “Reasons why Scotland would welcome the King of Spain”, early seventeenth century, CA4/9/10, f. 2b.

<sup>99</sup> “For this enterprise it will not be necessary more than three thousand men of aid, who will have to disembark on the Orkney Isles, which being [defensively] strong could be made in a short time impenetrable plus they are fertile and abundant of all the necessary things for the sustentation of the aforesaid number and very near to the forces of the more principal and powerful Catholics of Scotland among which is the Earl of Caithness, my brother, who is owner of all the lands of Caithness which are nearest to the Orkney Isles and can come to help with four thousand men”.

<sup>100</sup> BL, Colonel W. Sempill, “On Scottish affairs”, 1591, Add. MS 28,420, ff. 140-4.

<sup>101</sup> G. PARKER, *Philip II*, Chicago, Open Court, 1995, p. 184.

Nevertheless, Philip did not forget about Scotland, and he wanted to extend his net of informers and also appoint full time agents and Sempill was charged with this commission. His recommendation was passed to Philip in the winter of 1590; thus, Francis Mowbray, George Kerr, William Hamilton and George Conn, became pensioners of the crown of Spain.<sup>102</sup> By June, Kerr was sent from the Netherlands back to Scotland with letters from Sempill, Boyd, Bruce and Crichton.<sup>103</sup>

The English had been suspicious of Kerr's expeditions to and from Flanders for more than one year.<sup>104</sup> In April 1591, he had been sent to Flanders by the Scottish Catholic nobility.<sup>105</sup> In May, he had returned to Scotland with letters from Sempill, Boyd and Bruce for the Catholic nobles.<sup>106</sup> But on 27 December, Kerr was arrested carrying eight blanks, subscribed by Angus, Huntly, or Errol; some jointly by all three; and some by the three earls and Adam Gordon of Aunchindoun. They were not directed to any person in particular, yet by the humble words in the subscriptions they seem to be addressed to Philip II.<sup>107</sup>

On 31 December, Kerr was brought to Edinburgh.<sup>108</sup> While he was being interrogated, rumours spread of the imminent arrival of 7,000 invading soldiers from Spain, under the command of the Duke of Pastrana.<sup>109</sup> The news of the conspiracy worried Elizabeth, who immediately wrote to James to "rake it to the bottom".<sup>110</sup> Merely one day after Kerr was imprisoned in Tollbooth until the authorities could determine his involvement and its extent.<sup>111</sup> By mid-January, Kerr had already confessed that the blanks were part of a plot for a new Spanish invasion of England using Scotland as a base. The people he accused of being implicated were Huntly, Angus and Errol; Fintry, who was imprisoned at the time in Stirling Castle; the Jesuit Fathers James Gordon and Robert Abercorn, at that time in Scotland; and Crichton and Sempill, who were working in Spain.<sup>112</sup>

On 29 January, Kerr affirmed that the blanks were letters of credit given to him by the Scottish Catholic earls, to be passed on to Philip II, the Pope and others, requesting for a Spanish ambassador to be sent to Scotland "with money to relieve the Jesuits and instruments travelling here [...] and to entertain the noblemen, courtiers and parties favouring the cause, and to tempt the King himself".<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> SCA, "Colonel Sempill: representation of Scottish affairs", 15 Mar. 1630, CA4/5/16, ff. 1b-2.

<sup>103</sup> *CSP Scot.*, x, pp. 518-20.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem*, x, pp. 518-20

<sup>105</sup> *Ibidem*, x, p. 470

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, x, p. 532.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*, x, p. 828; see also D. CALDERWOOD, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, Edinburgh, Woodrow Society, 1842, pp. 145-50.

<sup>108</sup> *CSP Scot.*, xi, p. 16.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*, xi, pp. 16-17.

<sup>110</sup> Elizabeth I to James VI, Jan. 1593. G. B. HARRISON, *The letters of Queen Elizabeth*, London, Cassell, 1935, pp. 224-5.

<sup>111</sup> P. SHEARMAN, "The Spanish Blanks" in *Innes Review*, Vol. iii, 1952, pp. 81-2.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 82; Crichton was at the Spanish court, but he was not being successful interesting the King of Spain to send forces for Scotland. Very shortly, he would depart to go to the Rome to see the Pope. *CSP Scot.*, xi, p. 61.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibidem*, xi, pp. 22, 23, 33, 34; SHEARMAN, "The Spanish Blanks", [...], op. cit., p. 82.

Straight after this harsh blow to the Spanish intelligence system in Scotland, Sempill was suspected to have passed into Scotland to reorganise his net of agents,<sup>114</sup> allegedly he arrived in Scotland at the end of August 1592.<sup>115</sup> In the autumn, James VI reported to Robert Bowes that he had received offers from Parma on behalf of Philip II. Sempill, the messenger, had told James that Philip would provide 40,000 ducats to be delivered to Bothwell, for distribution between him and the Scottish Catholics.<sup>116</sup> According to Sempill, Parma's sudden death at the beginning of December 1592 was what had halted these preparations.<sup>117</sup> Finally, the Colonel, departed from a port near Seton at the end of December.<sup>118</sup>

The rumours of new Spanish plots rapidly increased during the summer of 1593.<sup>119</sup> It was said that Sempill had travelled from Spain to Newhaven, in France; and from there to the Water of Clyde, in the west of Scotland. Supposedly, he carried with him gold for the Catholic earls. However, Sempill had in fact not left Spain.<sup>120</sup> The entire international political scene had been transformed by the assassination of Henry III on 2 August. The proclamation of Henry of Navarre – the Huguenot leader – as King of France forced Philip to concentrate all his efforts on France. As a result, his plans for an invasion of the British Isles once again were inevitably postponed;<sup>121</sup> but secret reports from France remarked upon the “great preparations of the King of Spain’s ships both by land and sea” in France and Brittany.<sup>122</sup> This same source had assured that not only had the Governor of Bloy Castle [near Bordeaux] sent ships to Spain for supplies of gun powder, but he was also going to give shelter to the eight hundred heavy ships that were to sail from Spain for Scotland before the following October. The reports had claimed that Spain would “cause the Scottish ships to fight against the English ships “by extremity”. Supposedly, three ships were ready at the port of Leith to set sail for Spain.<sup>123</sup> On 22 December 1593, Robert Bowes finally confirmed to Burghley that he had been assured that an army was being prepared in Spain to embark for Scotland, but that the Scottish nobility had asked Philip through Sempill not only to send an army from Spain, but also to send another from the Low Countries.<sup>124</sup>

Certainly, the Scottish Catholic nobility, with their leaders on the continent since the three rebel earls had been exiled by the government because of their involvement in the “Spanish Blanks” affair, had seen themselves forced to conciliate with James;<sup>125</sup> but, secretly had informed Sempill that they would be ready for “whatever the Spanish king wanted”. Sempill reported these words to Philip II, however, the Spanish king, “being misinformed by English priests in Spain, did not reply to their offers”.<sup>126</sup> The Colonel decided to have the 5,040 pounds withdrawn

<sup>114</sup> *CSP Scot.*, x, pp. 657-9.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibidem*, x, p. 760.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibidem*, x, pp. 804-8.

<sup>117</sup> SCA, “Clase de papeles del Coronel Sempill”, 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 3; *CSP Scot.*, x, p. 824.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibidem*, x, p. 810.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibidem*, xi, p. 107, 697-700.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, xi, p. 697.

<sup>121</sup> G. PARKER, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998, p. 273.

<sup>122</sup> *CSP Scot.*, xi, p. 166.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibidem*, xi, pp. 166-7.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibidem*, xi, pp. 245-7.

<sup>125</sup> SCA, “Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill”, 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 3.

<sup>126</sup> SCA, “Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill”, 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, ff. 3-3b.

from Scotland, which had been given years earlier to Bruce, who handed the money to Philip's officials in Flanders.<sup>127</sup>

By 1597, Philip had recognised that the policy he had pursued towards England and Scotland, and his many attempts to interfere in their internal affairs, had failed. In his disillusionment, the King was finally convinced to use Ireland instead of Scotland for his plans, starting to support the earl of Tyrone's rebellions.<sup>128</sup> Sempill still refused to accept the situation that seemed forced upon him and continued presenting proposals to the King in order to attract his attention towards Scotland. But these proposals came to nothing since, in September 1598, Philip died.<sup>129</sup>

For the following five years, Sempill spent most of his time writing memorandums to Philip III trying to convince him to follow his father's steps by trying to re-establish Catholicism in the British Isles and to send missionaries to Scotland.<sup>130</sup> When in March 1603 Elizabeth died, James was invited to become King James I of England.<sup>131</sup> In 1604, Philip III and James signed a peace treaty.<sup>132</sup> Under these circumstances, it was clear that Spain was not in a situation to aid the dissidents in Scotland any longer.<sup>133</sup> Only the last of the believers, Sempill, refused to accept the situation.<sup>134</sup>

Sempill remained as the main expert on British affairs at the Spanish court. Philip III, however, preferred to keep peaceful relations with England, which meant that his interest in Scotland declined. Nevertheless, he kept the Spanish King regularly informed concerning Scottish affairs with series of memorandums stressing the necessity of aiding Scotland, militarily and religiously.<sup>135</sup> Although, he knew that Philip was not going to undertake a military enterprise, as his father had done. His efforts were not in vain. Sempill was conscious of the primary necessity of maintaining the ineffable «reputación de España» [Spanish reputation] at sea; thus, in the early seventeenth century he became the "father of the Spanish reconstructed navy".<sup>136</sup> In fact, his ideas on maritime defence were one of his greatest achievements.<sup>137</sup> The outbreak of Bohemian rebellion in 1618 expanded the scope of

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<sup>127</sup> SCA, "Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill", 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 3b.

<sup>128</sup> PARKER, *The Grand Strategy*, [...], op. cit., p. 278.

<sup>129</sup> TAYLOR, *The Scots College*, [...], op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>130</sup> SCA, "Diverse papers of Colonel Sempill", 15 Oct. 1620, CA4/3/13, f. 3b.

<sup>131</sup> BNM, "Declaration done by the English Council in favour of James, king of Scotland," 1603, MS 3826, ff. 73-4; BNM, "Edict publisher by the English declaring James, king of Scotland, as king of England" MS 7456, ff. 21-23v; L. CABRERA DE CÓRDOVA, *Relaciones de las Cosas Sucedidas en la Corte de España desde 1599 hasta 1614*, Salamanca, Martin Alegria, 1997, p. 174.

<sup>132</sup> BL, "Articles of the peace concluded at London betwene James King of England, Scotland and Phillip the 3. King of Spaine the Archdukes Albert and Isabella Clara Eugenia, Dukes de Brabant & e." 18 Aug. 1604, MSS Cott. Vesp., cxiii, ff. 2-9; CABRERA DE CÓRDOVA, *Relaciones*, [...], op. cit., p. 587; see also A. J. LOOMIE, "Philip III and the Stuart Succession in England, 1600-1603" in *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, vol. xliii, 1965, pp. 97-154.

<sup>133</sup> See J. D. MACKIE, "James VI. and I. and the Peace with Spain, 1604", in *Scottish Historical Records*, vol. xxiii, 1926, pp. 241-49.

<sup>134</sup> J. R. ELDER; *Spanish Influences in Spanish History*, Glasgow, Maclehose & Co., 1920, p. 273; see also BL, "Letter translated from Scottish language to Spanish written by Lord Beiltriesal to Colonel Sempill", 1603, Add. MS 28,420, f. 13.

<sup>135</sup> SCA, Sempill to the Count-Duke of Lucas, 28 Sept. 1627, CA4/4/20, f. 2.

<sup>136</sup> DURO, *Armada*, [...], op. cit., 1, p. 159.

his duties to include being adviser for the affairs of north-western Europe.<sup>138</sup> He was invited before the Council of State in 1618 by Philip to discuss these issues.<sup>139</sup> However as early as January of that year, he had written to the Spanish King recommending that “without doubt, Spain had to prepare for renewed hostilities against the Dutch on land”, but revenge against these “rebels, fishermen, a godless people” could be most effectively achieved at sea. Thus, it might also, he hoped, be combined with a new armada, which would invade and re-catholicise Scotland via her east coast ports.<sup>140</sup>

In December 1619, Sempill provided a memorandum for Philip showing recognition of the importance of obtaining support in the southern Baltic for Spanish maritime policy. Sempill had come to the conclusion that there was only one choice for Castile with regard to foreign policy: to concentrate her efforts on the land war that was erupting in central Europe and attempt to gain the Austrian Habsburgs’ support further west following the cessation of the treaty with the Dutch, due to expire in three years time. He advocated the equipping of a new armada of 100 ships, which were to be formed into four separate squadrons.<sup>141</sup> He suggested that this particular fleet should embark from the port of Ferrol, on Spain’s north-western coast, for “the northern seas”, where it could be employed to “disturb the trade and fisheries of the enemies in those parts”; thereby wreaking havoc on the commercial networks of the powers in this region. Sempill explicitly referred to Dutch and English merchants as the principal opponents of the house of Austria in the North Sea and the Baltic.<sup>142</sup> But Sempill was, in both plans, not envisaging the sending of this Armada to the Baltic, but rather to the waters near Orkney, where the English and the Dutch had their fisheries, thus introducing once again his life-long obsession of a Spanish intervention against England in Scottish territory.<sup>143</sup> But as Sempill tells us, his plan was once again dismissed.<sup>144</sup>

From August 1620, Sempill’s approach changed completely. His pleas subsequently became quite frantic, and he blatantly contradicted his previous advice. The Colonel now proposed not only a wider declaration of war “against all the heretics of Germany, the United Provinces and England” but an abandonment of all

<sup>137</sup> See for example BNM, “Proposition to place several ships to stop foreigners from passing through Gibraltar”, 1610, est. H, cod. 49, f. 484.

<sup>138</sup> SCA, Sempill to the Count-Duke of Lucas, 28 Sept. 1627, CA4/4/20, ff. 1-2.

<sup>139</sup> STRADLING, *The Armada of Flanders*, [...], op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>140</sup> AGS, Colonel W. Sempill to Philip III, 15 Jan. 1618, E Leg. 2034, f. 116; STRADLING, *The Armada of Flanders*, [...], op. cit., pp. 25, 37, 39; Gondomar was realistic about the chances of a program of re-Catholicisation in Scotland. He wrote to Philip III that “the persecution in Scotland is very heavy [...]. However they say that in Scotland there are no more than three priests although there are many Catholic nobles [...]. Consequently, everything which your Majesty might command to encourage the increase of priests in Scotland will be a great endeavour”. See Gondomar to Philip III, from London, 30 Dec. 1617, printed in A. J. LOOMIE, *Spain and the Jacobean Catholics*, London, Catholic Record Society, 1973, p. 97; see also BNM, “Representation to His Majesty referring the War against the rebels and the necessity of maritime forces to stop them”, Sept. 1916, est. H, cod. 52, ff. 258-70.

<sup>141</sup> AGS, “Diverse diplomatic documentation”, Dec. 1619, E Leg. 2034, f. 113.

<sup>142</sup> He may also had been aware of the contemporary situation in Scotland, where it has been estimated that up to 20,000 Dutchmen visited the Northern Isles each year. See A. FENTON, *The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland*, Edinburgh, Donald, 1978, p. 603.

<sup>143</sup> Curiously, this plan had already been carried out by a Spanish pirate barque collaborating with some Scots, including the son of the Earl of Orkney in 1589 and 1592. See C. SAENZ-CAMBRA, “The Adventures of the Spanish Barque”, in *Scots Link*, vol. LX, 2002, pp. 12-5.

<sup>144</sup> SCA, Sempill to the Count-Duke of Lucas, 28 Sept. 1627, CA4/4/20, ff. 2-2b.

support for the land campaign being fought by Ferdinand II.<sup>145</sup> Scotland was barely mentioned by Sempill in his reports before the death of Philip III and during the accession of Philip IV in 1621.<sup>146</sup>

The regeneration of the Spanish monarchy and its reputation were the two principal ideas that constituted the central element of the new government of Philip IV. His obsession was to break with the image of Spanish decline, by restoring it to the image of the Spain of the Catholic Kings or of Philip II.<sup>147</sup> Sempill still believed that an active war against England was the only way to stop the English support for the Dutch revolt and to secure the arrival of gold and silver from America; thus, solving the financial wreckage of the Spanish treasury arcs.<sup>148</sup> However, the possibility of a marriage between the Prince of Wales and a sister of Philip IV in 1623 pushed Spain towards more amicable relations with England. Sempill opposed this marriage, about which he bitterly wrote to the conde-duque of Olivares, minister and *valido* [court favourite] of Philip IV.<sup>149</sup>

The negotiations for this marriage did not succeed and when Philip IV claimed, in a session of the Council of State on 8 February 1625, that “Spain should keep in guard against England maintaining the contacts with the discontents in Ireland and Scotland”,<sup>150</sup> Sempill thought that his time had come. Only two days later, he presented a discourse “on the illnesses of the Spanish monarchy” to Philip IV.<sup>151</sup> This discourse was followed by two memorandums; the first directed to the Spanish monarch in which he suggested a new military attack against England.<sup>152</sup> The second, in exactly the same terms, was directed to Olivares.<sup>153</sup> The Spanish interests in Scotland was revived after the Stewart-Spanish Habsburg war over Cadiz broke out in November 1625, but because of the Spanish involvement in the Thirty Years War, which was bleeding the royal treasury arcs, once again his proposals were dismissed.<sup>154</sup>

For the next five years, most of his efforts were spent in the attempt to stir up discontent amongst Catholics in Scotland and Ireland and in establishing the Scots College in Spain.<sup>155</sup> Sempill, disappointed with the progress of his situation in the court, decided to open a college “because if the Catholic religion wanted to be maintained in Scotland, there must be a place where the catholic nobles can send their children to be taught”.<sup>156</sup> For this, he used the house of Jacomotrezo in Madrid, a

<sup>145</sup> AGS, Sempill to Philip III, Aug. 1620, E Leg. 2034, f. 109.

<sup>146</sup> BNM, est. H, cod. 56, ff. 240, 242.

<sup>147</sup> See ch. 2 of F. MARTÍN SANZ, *La Política Internacional de Felipe IV*, Segovia, Martin Sanz, 1998.

<sup>148</sup> BNM, est. H, cod. 56, ff. 242, 283.

<sup>149</sup> BNM, “Representation to the count of Olivares”, from Madrid, 28 Mar. 1623, est. H, cod. 56.

<sup>150</sup> AGS, CE Leg. 8-II-1625.

<sup>151</sup> BNM, Sempill, “General discussion on the sicknesses that the Spanish monarchy suffers”, from el Prado, 10 Feb. 1625, est. H, cod. 59.

<sup>152</sup> AGS, Sempill, “On the necessity of having a strong navy”, 1625, Ce de 8-II-1625; AGS, “On Scots and English affairs”, without date, E Leg. 2035, f. 42.

<sup>153</sup> BNM, est. H, cod. 59, f. 50.

<sup>154</sup> SCA, “Colonel Sempill: representation of Scots affairs”, 15 Mar. 1630, CA4/5/16, ff. 1-2.

<sup>155</sup> SCA, Sempill to the Count-Duke of Lucas, 28 Sept. 1627, CA4/4/20, ff. 2-3.

<sup>156</sup> SCA, “Colonel Sempill: representation of Scots affairs”, 15 Mar. 1630, CA4/5/16, f. 2; the Scottish Catholic nobles also wrote to Philip IV asking for a college where to educate their children according to the Catholic faith. BNM, “Request by the Scottish nobility to His Majesty asking for the foundation of a Scots College in Spain”, MS 6949, ff. 34-6.

property that Philip III had granted to him in 1613 as an equivalent of the sums due to him in arrears of salaries and pensions since 1585.<sup>157</sup> This house he designed and endowed as a college for the education of Catholic missionaries who were to be drawn from the gentry of Scotland, and by preference from members of his own family. The government of the college was to be in the hands of the Jesuit fathers. The original deed of foundation and endowment was dated 10 May 1623;<sup>158</sup> however, the Scots College in Madrid was not finally opened until June 1627.<sup>159</sup> Although the College occupied most of his time, he never abandoned the idea of a Spanish military action in the Isle.<sup>160</sup>

Sempill lived to a great age, occupying the office of «gentil hombre de la boca de su Majestad»,<sup>161</sup> to the King at the Spanish court, and busying himself with the affairs of the Catholic missionaries in Scotland to whose support he liberally contributed, as is shown by the letter of Father Archangel Leslie, addressed to the Colonel, dated 20 June 1630, printed in the *Historical Records of the Family of Leslie*.<sup>162</sup>

By 15 March 1630, Sempill declared that he had for a long time been thinking about his retirement. Already during the reign of Philip III he had appointed the laird of Fintry, pensioner of the Spanish crown, as a possible successor, however, Fintry, whose main attraction for the Spaniards was that he claimed to be the head of one of the oldest noble families of Scotland, had died a few years before. Francis Mombray, who had been thought of as possible candidate for a long time, had been beheaded. Also, George Kerr, who had been entertained in the Spanish court with a pension of 100 crowns per month, was dead. Thus, he now appointed another five possible candidates which he believed suitable for the position. The first was William Hay, the brother of the Constable of Scotland; Lord Hamilton, living in Ireland at that time, brother of the Earl of Abercrombie and the Earl of Hamilton;<sup>163</sup> James Sempill, his own nephew in Scotland; George Leslie, living in England; and George Conn, who was settled in Rome.<sup>164</sup>

Sempill died in his house of Jacomotrezo on 1 March 1630, at the age of eighty-seven. Philip IV, knowing the necessity of acquiring a new advisor, had his eyes on Colonel Leslie, a second son from the third marriage of the tenth baron of Balquhain, near Inverurie,<sup>165</sup> who had had a surprisingly similar career to Colonel Sempill's. By 1624, Leslie had left Scotland and was in the service of the United Provinces of the northern Netherlands. Nevertheless, by 1630, he was fighting on the

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<sup>157</sup> SCA, "Colonel Sempill: representation of Scots affairs", 15 Mar. 1630, CA4/5/16, f. 2.

<sup>158</sup> SCA, "Deed of foundation and endowment of the Scots College Spain (copy)", 10 May 1623, CA 4/12/1.

<sup>159</sup> TAYLOR, *The Scots College*, [...], op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>160</sup> SCA, Sempill to the Count-Duke of Lucas, 28 Sept. 1627, CA4/4/20, f. 3.

<sup>161</sup> "gentleman of the mouth of his Majesty"

<sup>162</sup> C. LESLIE, *Historical Records of the Family of Leslie from 1067-1868*, vol. iii, Edinburgh, Edmoston & Douglas, 1869, p. 421. My most sincere thanks to Dr David Worthington for providing me with this information.

<sup>163</sup> Sempill had already recommended Robert Hamilton to be captain of one of the three companies of Scots to be maintained in the Spanish Low Countries, on 7 Jan. 1620. SCA, Sempill to Philip IV, CA4/3/5, f. 1.

<sup>164</sup> SCA, "Colonel Sempill: representation on Scottish affairs", 15 Mar. 1630, CA4/5/16, f. 2b.

<sup>165</sup> LESLIE, *Historical Records*, [...], op. cit., iii, p. 85.

side of Ferdinand II.<sup>166</sup> However, Leslie was more interested in maintaining his position with the emperor, and declined the offer to act as Philip's advisor.<sup>167</sup> Finally by 1631, Philip IV did not see the necessity anymore of having a Scottish adviser entertained at the Spanish court in Madrid, making William Sempill the first and the last Scotsman ever to hold this position.<sup>168</sup>

A few words remain to be said regarding William Sempill and the motives behind his actions. We have long been familiar with the picture of the typical intelligencer of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the traditional historiography has been commonly represented him, that he was motivated by one motive in all his conduct – the desire to lay his hands on money. However, as this research has revealed, William Sempill was no man of a single motive. Money was clearly not his incentive as his letters have revealed: he not only rejected Philip II's money from the very beginning, but he used his life's savings to open the Scots College in Spain.

As we have seen in the previous pages, Sempill advised the Spanish kings on British matters for over forty years, but he always did it for what he believed to be the good of his motherland. He understood the Scottish Catholics' situation, and so he shrank from the very thought of responsibility in having to help them to reinstate Catholicism back in the British Isles. He was conscious of the religiousness of the Spanish monarchs, and quite understandably, on many occasions tried to exploit it. It is this use of his strategic position as adviser to the Spanish rulers what previous historiography has implied as lack of loyalty from him.<sup>169</sup> Indeed, loyalty was still a rudimentary feeling through the period under study, but in indicting Sempill for lack of loyalty, we are in fact arraigning him for a crime which is in truth pointless to lay specifically at his door, since as this article proves, he was a man of deep loyalty, not only to those he served and his motherland, but also to his beliefs.

In evaluating Sempill's influence in Spanish politics, the final question that has to be answered is whether he accomplished the purpose for which he started to work for Spain. The answer is negative. Apart from a few minor successes, Sempill's intentions to convert Scotland back to Catholicism and turn it into the springboard for the enterprise of England, or in any case persuade the Spanish monarchs to intervene in Scottish politics, was a complete failure. Sempill's intrigues in Scotland did not involve any wars of religion; there had only been two rather half-hearted rebellions and some occasional demonstrations of force, as the case of Lord Maxwell's two revolts or the «Spanish Blanks» affair. However, as paradoxical as it seems, Sempill's failures had taught him the necessity for Spain to strengthen its maritime power. Thus, he became the greatest influence on the rebuilding of the Spanish navy in the 1620's.<sup>170</sup>

It was clear that when Colonel William Sempill died in 1630, contemporaries certainly believed that a great figure had passed on and that the political landscape had shifted substantially with his death.<sup>171</sup> In truth, Sempill's death had changed the very nature of Spanish politics. Religious controversies did not cease in 1630 and

<sup>166</sup> J. GRANT, *Memoirs and Adventures of Sir John Hepburnm*, Edinburgh, Blackwood, 1851, p. 189.

<sup>167</sup> H. SCHWARZ, *The Imperial Privy Council in the Seventeenth Century*, New York, Harvard University Press, 1943, p. 276.

<sup>168</sup> SCA, "Diverse documents of W. Sempill", without date, CA4/11/8, f. 1.

<sup>169</sup> DURO, *Armada*, [...], op. cit., 1, pp. 158-9.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibidem*, 1, p. 159.

religious motives in political affairs were prominent of years to come, but the biggest step toward a predominantly secular approach to Spain's political affairs towards British Isles had been taken.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> See Jesuit Father and historian George Conn's comments on Sempill's death in AGS, "On Scots and English affairs", E Leg. 2035, f. 42.

<sup>172</sup> See chs. 3 and 4 of MARTÍN SANZ, *Política Internacional* [...], op. cit.