

William Semple and the Foundation of the College

Among the decrees issued by the general council of the Catholic Church, held in the city of Trent at the time of the reformation, a considerable number dealt with measures thought necessary to correct abuses and failings among the clergy. In an attempt to improve the situation for the future, the council ordered, in particular, that the preparation of young men for the priesthood be conducted in special training centres, to be called seminaries, which were to be set up throughout the Catholic world.

It is undeniable that the catastrophic state in which the Catholic Church found itself in Scotland after 1560 was due, in no small measure, to many of the clergy having been ill-prepared, spiritually and intellectually, for their work. If the Council of Trent's instruction regarding the establishment of seminaries was worth heeding in any country, that country was Scotland. But in the decades that followed the Scottish reformation, the Catholics there were in no position to be able to comply with the council's decree.

It was this impossibility of having seminaries in Scotland that led to the establishment of various institutions on the continent, where young Scotsmen who believed themselves called to the priesthood might go to receive the appropriate training. Such Scottish seminaries were set up in Flanders, at Paris and at Rome. One other was also established. Its location was Spain, a not unexpected choice, since that country regarded itself as the bastion of the old faith, with a special mission to combat the heretics of England and Scotland. A Scottish seminary there could be assured of as warm a welcome as similar English colleges, already founded, had received. A Scots College in Spain duly came into being and it is the story of its foundation and continued existence until the present day that is told here.

In this story, there have been, up to the present at least, two very distinct phases: the college was in Madrid for the first one hundred and forty years of its existence, while it has been in Valladolid for the last two hundred years. The change in location is only the most obvious difference between the two periods of the college's history; the move from Madrid to Valladolid was accompanied by important changes in several other respects and these will emerge in the course of this narrative. But let us begin at the beginning.

The College was founded in Madrid in 1627 by a Scotsman, William Semple. Semple has been described as "a soldier of fortune and political agent"¹ in the service of the King of Spain, but he himself gives a much prouder account of how he came to settle in Madrid than the expression "soldier of fortune" might suggest.²

He was a son, perhaps illegitimate,³ of Robert, the third Viscount Semple (or Sempill, as the name is now usually written), born in Lochwinnoch in 1546. As a youth in the 1560s, he probably was a member of the household of Mary, Queen of Scots, but after Langside and Mary's flight to England Semple went to the Low Countries and accepted a commission in the service of the Prince of Orange. For some years, therefore, he fought in the rebel forces against Spain. Around 1573, the Earl of Winton and his son, John Seton, were in the Netherlands trying to secure Spanish aid for the Scottish queen. The son met Semple in Flanders and succeeded in persuading him to go over to the service of Spain and thereby assist in maintaining secret contacts between that country and Mary or her supporters. Unable, as he says, to resist such an appeal to his loyalty to his queen, he conscientiously obeyed and dedicated the rest of his life to the task

1. *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. XVII, p. 1177.

2. In the college archives in Valladolid, Box no. 3 contains many documents referring to the life and activities of the founder. The most important of these for details of his life before 1627 is document no. 5: Unsigned description of the services performed by Col. Semple (c. 1603).

Other important primary sources in the college archives are:—Box 49, document 1: Testimony of D. Bernardino de Mendoza (who had been ambassador in both London and Paris), concerning the merits of Col. Semple (1601); and, best of all, Box 54, document 3: An account, for the king, of the merits of Col. William Semple (c. 1625-26).

These documents are in Spanish. The college archives also contain three different sets of notes, compiled in the nineteenth century, and relating to the history of Semple and the Madrid era of the college:—

- (a) Box 54, document 1 (viz., 54/1): Annals of the Scots College from 1546 (*sic*) to 1697 (in the writing of Alexander Cameron II, rector, 1810-33); this manuscript, in Spanish, is the source of the account of the founder's life and work published in the *Catholic Directory for Scotland*, 1873, pp. 161-164, and in William Forbes-Leith S. J., *Narratives of Scottish Catholics under Mary Stuart and James VI*, 1885, pp. 368-372;
 - (b) 54/14: Historical Summary of the Scots College (c. 1835); in Spanish and in the writing of John Cameron, rector 1833-73;
 - (c) 54/15: Historical Notice of the Scottish College at Madrid and Valladolid, by George Augustine Griffin (1858); in English and unreliable.
3. "His exact place in the family tree has been variously stated." (*D. N. B.*, XVII, p. 1177). Cf. Balfour Paul, *The Scots Peerage*, VII, p. 551.

of being an intermediary between Spain and the Catholic cause in Scotland.

How he spent the next eight or nine years is unknown. It may be assumed that he remained in the Low Countries, but it is not clear whether he continued to be an apparently active supporter of the rebel cause. At all events, he was in secret communication in 1582 with the Spanish viceroy, Alessandro Farnese, Duke of Parma, and, by methods which his former colleagues might have considered a betrayal, he was able to deliver to the viceroy the town of Lier, near Antwerp, where he was in charge of a company of Scottish soldiers. Later, he managed to raise the siege of the same town⁴ and, thereafter, he had several other successes, as much diplomatic as military. He persuaded three regiments of Scottish infantry and three corps of lancers to desert William of Orange and place themselves at the disposition of the Duke of Parma. Two Scots colonels were similarly induced to hand over the garrisons which they commanded, in Bruges and Guelders.

Semple's achievements, it must be noted, were not isolated incidents, since the supporters of the two sides, and particularly the mercenaries, were not always unswerving in their attachment to the cause for which they were fighting. Indeed, in 1582-83 especially, many officers of note in William's army defected and offered themselves to the Duke of Parma. Nevertheless, the commander of the Spanish forces was, according to Semple, deeply impressed by the assistance that he (Semple) had already given and the services which he could render in the future. He offered Semple rewards that would have brought him a yearly income of over 50,000 *reals*.⁵ As Semple was to learn by bitter practical experience some years later, the Spanish exchequer was in no position to be able to pay such financial rewards; the armies in the Netherlands suffered from a grievous shortage of money, due to the inability of the king to remit nearly enough from Spain. But, at the time, Semple declined the reward, saying that, while his own money lasted, he was content to know that he had served the king. About this time, he resigned his active commission and later in 1582 agreed, at Parma's request, to make his way to Spain, where he could do much to convince Philip II of the value to him of the assistance of Scottish Catholics in the struggle against England; from there also, he would be able to pass on to the Spanish ambassador in London all the information that he obtained from his secret correspondence with Scotland.

4. Perhaps these two operations were in reality one: that he somehow managed to leave the town in order to lead a Spanish force back in.

5. Sums of money in the relevant documents are expressed sometimes in *reals*, at other times in ducats, florins or *escudos*. In this narrative all references to money will be made, as far as possible, in terms of *reals*, until 1885 the unit of currency in Spain. A ducat was worth eleven *reals*, a florin and an *escudo* were worth ten *reals*; and there were roughly one hundred *reals* to the pound sterling.

His work as an agent or intermediary kept Semple in Spain until 1588, when he was sent to Scotland as an envoy of the Duke of Parma. He claims to have had 50,000 *escudos* with him for expenses. On arrival, he presented himself to King James and offered him Spanish money, arms and even men, if he would fight to avenge his mother's execution.⁶ When, despite his good reception by James, the proposal was rejected, he contacted members of the Scottish nobility, hoping that, although the king would not act, they at least would be sufficiently encouraged by his assurances of Spanish support to take up arms for the faith. During these negotiations, word reached the country of the miserable failure of the Armada (an adventure which, Semple claims, he had vainly urged the king not to undertake); and, as a result of the indignation among the Protestants and the outcry against all things Spanish, any diplomatic immunity which he had enjoyed was removed and he was arrested and imprisoned in a house at the Grassmarket in Edinburgh. Plans were made to extract a confession from him that might implicate many Scottish Catholics but, before that could take place, he escaped, by the help of his sister, the Countess of Ross, secretly resumed his contacts with the Catholic nobles and then managed to get across to Flanders.⁷ He remained with the Duke of Parma until the end of 1589 but then returned to Madrid, to take up his work again as an agent, carrying with him Parma's commendation and request for suitable reward.⁸

By 1597 Philip II had recognised that the policy he had pursued towards England and his many attempts to interfere in affairs there had failed. According to Semple, these failures were due in large measure to the king's having heeded advice from the English Jesuits in Spain—advice that not only was bad, but also frequently in conflict with that which Semple gave or would have given. In his disillusionment, the king turned to the Scotsman as his most trusted adviser, thus affording him the opportunity, at last, of presenting proposals to the king without fear of contradiction by others. But alas, these proposals came to nothing since, in September 1598, Philip died.⁹

6. It has also been suggested that his mission had, as its aim, to try to arrange a marriage between James and the Infanta of Spain.

7. After Semple's escape from custody (he had been placed under guard in the house of one Robert Gourlay), an order was issued (20th August 1588) forbidding the lieges to harbour one who, on the pretext of bearing a "commissioun frome the Prince of Parma to the Kingis Majestie," had in fact "tressonablie delt with sindrie of his Majesteis subjectis for alienating of thair myndis frome his Hienes obedience." (*The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, vol. IV (first series), p. 316.)

8. College archives 3/2: Copy of letter of Duke of Parma to Philip II, recommending Semple (30th November 1588); *ibid.*, 3/3: Letter of Duke of Parma to Philip II, presenting Semple (undated; probably 1589).

Semple's servant, Thomas Pringle, sent by his master to Scotland in November 1588, was arrested in England in the February following, with a collection of letters from various Scottish personages to Philip II, the Duke of Parma and Col. Semple (*The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, vol. IV (first series), pp. 360 and 820-1.)

9. It was in this year that Semple's kinsman, Robert, the fourth Lord Semple, was nominated Scottish ambassador in Madrid.

In 1603, the year of Elizabeth's death and James' accession to the English throne, Semple was again occupied in state affairs. He went to Valladolid, whither the new king, Philip III, had transferred his capital, to try to convince him that, at this juncture in England's destinies, he had an opportunity of intervening successfully and bringing Protestant England to her knees. Philip sent him to Flanders in order to explain his ideas to the viceroy there, the Archduke Albert of Austria, who was Philip's cousin and also enjoyed the benefice of Cardinal Archbishop of Toledo. While there, Semple became involved in military as well as diplomatic activities and was wounded in the thigh at the siege of Rheinberg. Advantage was taken of his presence in the Netherlands to send him on a secret mission to France; and while engaged on this, he was discovered and imprisoned in Calais, although soon released. No more is heard for some years of Semple's efforts, either in Flanders (where he remained until 1610) or in Spain. In fact, there is only one more direct reference to Semple's activities as an agent or intermediary; that occurs in 1612 when, by Philip III's orders, he resumed his secret correspondence with some Scottish nobles who were thought capable of initiating an attempt to overthrow the by now well-established Protestant regime.

Lack of success in achieving his ambition to bring Scotland and England back to Catholicism with Spanish aid was not Semple's only worry. Another and more personal anxiety was his own poverty. He had declined, for the time being, any financial reward after his exploits in the Netherlands in 1582 but, by 1594, it was noticeable that Semple needed money. All of his own wealth was gone and although the king went through the formalities of ordering payment of his pension to the colonel, the treasury was so near exhaustion that nothing was forthcoming. A solution to his financial embarrassment presented itself in marriage to a fairly wealthy widow and thus, in that same year of 1594 and at the age of 48, Semple married Doña María de Ledesma, the daughter of Don Juan de Ledesma, who had been secretary of the Royal Council (or advisory body) of the Indies. By her first husband's will, she enjoyed an annual income of 3,000 *reals* on the Burgos sales-tax. (This 10% tax on all sales was levied throughout Spain; meant to produce much needed revenue for the exchequer, it also discouraged trade and greatly stifled development of the economy.) Moreover, she brought to her union with Semple a dowry of over 100,000 *reals*.¹⁰ Whether there were any children of the marriage is not clear. Doña María certainly had two daughters, but these may have been by her first husband. Semple had at least two illegitimate sons, one of whom lived in Flanders and the other in Spain; later, these two were successfully to importune the college for annual allowances from their father's estate.

10. College archives 54/1: Annals of the Scots College.

The Deed of Foundation states that she brought no dowry or other income to their union, but this may simply be a legal fiction to allow the deed to be drawn up in the manner it was.

Despite frequent attempts to be paid something, either the lump-sums he had been promised or his annual pension, Semple received nothing except an honorary title or two.¹¹ The crown and officialdom were sympathetic and on several occasions gave orders for payment to be made.¹² But these orders were ignored — not surprisingly, since the country was in a condition of near-bankruptcy at the time. Semple's poverty was so great that in 1610 he was given leave to return to Madrid from Flanders in order to try to put his finances in better order. To pay his debts, he was forced to sell property belonging to his wife and such were his straits that he had to suffer the shame of being unable to give dowries to the two daughters, one when she married and the other when she entered a convent.

Strangely enough, it was this very poverty of the colonel and the treasury's inability to relieve it that proved to be most important factors in Semple's decision to found the college. Since there was so much money owed to him (something over 200,000 *reals*), and so little prospect of it being paid, Semple in 1613 requested and received, in lieu of payment, some property in Madrid that belonged to the crown.¹³ This property consisted of two houses. One had been the home of Giacomo di Trezo, a Milanese artist in metalwork who had executed several commissions for Philip II, in particular that of the tabernacle of the basilica in the Escorial. The crown had bought his house in 1591¹⁴ and three years later it had acquired the adjoining house, the property of Da Gracia Ramírez.¹⁵ It was these two houses which Semple was given in 1613. The property was very centrally situated and fairly extensive, occupying the whole of the frontage of the Calle Jacometrezo (a corruption of the name Giacomo di Trezo) between the Calle Chinchilla and the Calle de la Salud (or del Carmen). The length of the facade was about 160 feet, and the lateral facades on the two side streets were slightly longer still. The property was officially valued at an exaggerated figure that cancelled ninety per cent of the money owed to Semple by the state. (The small balance that remained was paid to him in 1617.)¹⁶

Once in possession of the houses, Semple discovered that they came with a burden of *aposeno* attached to them, whereby a number of royal servants had to be given free accommodation. Even more serious, the houses had been neglected for years and were in such

11. In later life, Semple was always styled "*Gentilhomme de la boca de S. M.*," which originally meant a person who had the honour of serving the king at table; afterwards, a person who accompanied the king when he appeared in public.

12. For example, college archives 3/4: Philip II to Archduke Ernesto (1594); Scottish Catholic Archives, Columba House, Edinburgh: Philip III to Archduke Alberto (6th August 1603).

13. College archives 3/7 and 3/8.

14. *Ibid.*, 4/15: Copy of royal *cédula* ordering purchase of house; and 4/16: authorisation for its resale.

15. *Ibid.*, 4/18 and 4/19.

16. Cf. Royal order to paymaster general, 14th November 1617. (Columba House.)

a ruinous condition that immediate and extensive repairs had to be undertaken. Without money of his own, Semple took on a *censo* or loan, of more than 200,000 *reals*. He was informed that, on receipt of 15,000 *reals* from him, his unwanted "guests" would depart and the houses be left free for paying tenants. Semple was able to raise less than half of the required sum and it was not until 1635 that all the necessary money was paid and the last of the "guests" removed.

Despite the king's lack of financial resources, money was being sent each year to the Scots seminary at Douai in Flanders; probably an annual pension of 11,000 *reals* was being sent there, the stipulation being made that it be spent on the students' maintenance and travelling expenses to and from Scotland. An annual sum had also been sent, since 1583, to priests working in Scotland. In 1620, Semple managed to have this yearly remittance raised to 55,440 *reals*. The Spanish court was encouraged by news of an increase in the number of priests working in Scotland (twenty, it was said, belonging to various religious orders or to none) and by reports of many converts, including some Glaswegians of social and financial standing; but there were complaints from some of the priests that most of the money was finding its way to the Jesuit missionaries and that others were receiving hardly anything.

The first mention of a project to open a Scots seminary in Madrid occurs in the year 1623. By this time, Philip III was dead and his son had acceded in 1621 as Philip IV, weak, indolent but well-intentioned. In 1623, Father Hugh Semple, the colonel's nephew, who later on was to become the first of the Jesuit administrators of the college, wrote to His Majesty, listing the many reasons why he should establish a Scots seminary in Spain.¹⁷ Two years later, through the Duke of Pastrana, his ambassador in Rome, the king wrote to Urban VIII, expressing his desire to set up a seminary for Scotland, similar to those already existing in Spain for the English and Irish; as he had no money at his disposal for this purpose, he asked the Pope to allocate an annual allowance to the seminary of 38,000 *reals* from the income of some ecclesiastical benefice in Spain that might fall vacant in the near future.¹⁸ Urban's reply was discouraging. He saw no need for another Scots seminary abroad and indeed he considered it preferable that suitable students be educated in the college already established in Rome than that a new college be founded in Madrid.¹⁹

17. Cf. college archives 42/1a.

It was hoped that further weight would be lent to this request by the anticipated betrothal of the king's daughter to the Prince of Wales. Col Semple was so confident that the "Spanish match" would take place that he informed a fellow-Scot in Spain that it had been set for 8th September of that year, 1623. (*The Innes Review*, XX, 1969, p. 145.)

18. Letters of Philip IV to Urban VIII and to Duke of Pastrana (his ambassador to Holy See), 13th July 1625. (Columba House; copy of former in college archives 22/1/2.)

19. College archives 54/1.

It appears that Colonel Semple now wrote to the Pope, firmly disagreeing with the latter's views; although it was true that there were few Catholics in Scotland, this was due to the shortage of native priests and hence was an argument not against, but in favour of, a college in Spain. Nor did he think so highly of a Roman education as the Pope; if the example of various foreign colleges in the Eternal City were any guide, the products would be self-willed youths, more keen on a life of tranquillity and ease than on working for their faith and country. He therefore begged the Pope's protection and help for his venture.²⁰

Philip IV took the affair a stage further by informing the Pope that in his (the king's) power there lay the right to assign an annual pension of 11,000 *reals* from the revenues of the bishopric of Cadiz; that, until the present, this sum had been sent to the Archbishop of Cashel to be distributed among needy priests in Ireland; but that, since the archbishop had recently died, he was now proposing to make over half of the pension to a Scots seminary in Madrid.²¹ This royal initiative may have been in response to appeals which the colonel made about this time to the king, requesting the endowment of the projected college.²² (Many years later, the "Irish half" of the Cadiz pension was also given to the Scots, to be used for the expenses of those returning to the mission.)

The stage was now set for the establishment of the college. This, Colonel Semple and his wife did by a Deed of Foundation dated 10th May, 1627. A full translation of the document is given in Appendix I and its main provisions are the following: the college will be situated in Semple's property in the Calle Jacometrezo; its government and administration are to be supervised by the Father Provincial of the Toledo province of the Society of Jesus; the students have to be native Scots, as many as the funds will support, who will be educated so as to return to Scotland and work for the conversion of their country; all the founders' income and property is made over to the foundation, subject to certain limitations until after their deaths.

The Pope was informed of the foundation having been made and, in reply, blessed the work and assured Semple of his desires that the new college should prosper.²³ But the initial stages were inauspicious. Don Gaspar de Guzmán, the Count of Olivares, who was Philip's chief minister and indeed the power behind the throne, had consented to become the patron of the college. To him, the

20. Col. Semple to Urban VIII, 17th January 1627. (Columba House.)

21. College archives 11/10: Philip IV to Count of Oñate, his ambassador in Rome, for Urban VIII (9th May 1627).

22. Ibid. 3/16 and 54/3 (both undated, but c. 1626).

The former document is a draft copy of a petition, written in Fr. Hugh Semple's hand.

23. Ibid. 54/1.

colonel wrote, complaining that the Cadiz pension was not being paid, that there were still some royal employees living rent-free in the house, that he (Semple) was finding it impossible to support the (eight?) students for whose upkeep at Douai(?) he had promised to pay and that, in fact, he and his wife were without money even to buy food.²⁴ At this time, Colonel Semple was still acting as an intermediary with Scotland, despite advancing age and infirmity. He felt that, by now, any military ventures would be useless and that the best hopes lay in sending all possible assistance to the missionaries working for the faith in Scotland; and so he continued to arrange that the annual subsidy be paid.

Many alterations were necessary in that portion of Semple's property which it had been decided to make into the seminary. Above all, much had to be spent upon preparing a chapel. Permission was received in 1630 from the Archbishop of Toledo, allowing the chapel to be opened and Mass to be offered therein;²⁵ and all the alterations were completed by the following year, but at a cost of 124,000 *reals*. The result was that Semple, in other words the college, was now in debt to a total of 240,000 *reals*, with annual interest of 16,500. It is no wonder that the plan which Semple had had of founding another house of studies, this time in Seville, for the sons of Scottish gentry, was never put into effect. Indeed, once more, in 1632, Semple had to beseech the king for help—he wanted the king's authorisation of the foundation and payment of money promised and due to him, particularly from the sales-tax in Murcia and from rents in Lille; he complained that the king was much more generous to the English and Irish, yet their need was not anything like as great.²⁶

By the following year, Semple, now eighty-six years old, was bedridden and paralysed in arms and legs. Realising that death was near, he made his will on 10th February.²⁷ This document confirms the dispositions of the deed of foundation, adding one or two new clauses; viz, that the number of students should be not more than twelve, that they should be of noble birth, and that preference should be given to applicants who were his own relatives; and that, in addition to debts incurred by repairs and alterations to the property, he also owed almost 16,000 *reals* to Don Juan Fernández de Bobadilla, whom he nominated administrator of the college temporalities,

24. Ibid. 54/1: Annals of the Scots College, citing a letter of Semple to Olivares, 11th September 1628.

25. Ibid. 3/25.

26. Ibid. 54/1.

27. An early translation of the will, in English, is in Columba House, Edinburgh; the text is printed in *Miscellaneous Papers Principally Illustrative of Events in the Reigns of Queen Mary and King James VI* (Maitland Club, no 26, 1834), pp. 123-130. An authenticated copy of the codicil is in the college archives 3/29. (Semple, who had made an almost identical will at the beginning of the previous year, was too infirm to sign the second one, which was signed on his behalf.)

with free lodging and maintenance for life. Having received the sacraments, William Semple breathed his last on the evening of 1st March of the same year, 1633.

The founder of the college had lived a life strange to our ways of thinking and with more than its quota of adventures. But in his day, mercenaries were not unknown who, after their years of active service, settled in the country of their adoption and acted as intermediaries with the country of their birth. It may well be that Semple's foundation of the college (and this is the aspect of his life that is of interest here) was a somewhat irresponsible action, given his lack of resources, the absence of solid prospects for the future and the great debts with which he left the college burdened. It is true that, at the end of his life, Semple himself was living in fairly comfortable circumstances, the owner of a carriage and two horses and with several servants, including Martin, his gentleman's gentleman, and Donald, an old Scots retainer.²⁸ But the long-term prospects were not good. Nevertheless, the college survived, eventually reached a solid financial condition and, albeit in the very long run, began to send priests to Scotland in considerable numbers. Hindsight, if nothing else, forces us to recognise a providential imprudence in the face of apparently certain calamity.²⁹

28. College archives 3/27: Inventory and taxation of Semple's possessions (1633).

29. A point of historical interest is that it was in the Scots College that Lope de Vega, the poet and dramatist, was seen for the last time in public. Attending a lecture there, he collapsed, was taken home, and died a day or two later, on 27th August 1635.