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Notes and Documents

Montgomerie and the Pirates

Rudolf Brotanek and George Stevenson in earlier days; Helena Shire and Mark Dilworth in more recent times have helped to piece together the jigsaw of Montgomerie's life. His early friendship with James VI has been established, his lawsuit over the pension, his involvement in the Ailsa Craig conspiracy and his final desire to join the Dominicans at Würzburg. Perhaps the haziest period of all however is that between 1586 and 1590. During this time he was almost certainly abroad and imprisoned, but beyond these general facts, mostly derived from his own poetry, little is known.

Two entries in *The Calendar of State Papers (Foreign)*, hitherto unnoticed, seem to clarify the situation. The first is a letter from Sir Thomas Cecil to Burghley, dated 26th June, 1586.

We embarked at Gravesend at 5 o'clock on Thursday morning (June 23) and did not reach the Brill until 4 o'clock of the next afternoon. "We had like to have had some little fights by the way with our pinnace, by meeting of a Scottish bark of eight score ton, with six score Scottish soldiers within her, and one Montgomery, one as he saith himself, near in credit and place to the King of Scotland; one that hath served in the Low Countries and captain of that ship. There is great suspicion, as the Scottish man saith, that he was a taking man, notwithstanding his excuse was that being without a pilot, he durst not put in, neither into Flushing nor the Brill; but bearing into the wind of us, by the nimbleness of our pinnace we won the wind of him, and so wafting him to come near and to strike his bonnet, finding him unwilling to do it, we made so near a shot at him as at the length we made him and the master of the ship to come aboard of us with her skiff, and sent two of our mariners aboard of her, where we found unlawful lading, both sea coal and barrels of salt, without cocquet." We kept the Captain and master aboard of us, and brought the ship into this haven, where she is now. The captain is gone with letters of credit to his Excellency, and I stay both men and ship until his return.¹

That the Montgomery in question is the poet admits of little doubt. In the same year (1586) his name had appeared in the list of officers,

¹ *Calendar of State Papers (Foreign)*, 26th June, 1586, p. 55.

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accompanying the Master of Gray into the Low Countries.² He was at that time "near in credit and place to the King of Scotland," being his "maister poete." His rank was that of captain and he did travel through many lands as a soldier, according to Thomas Duff's first Latin poem,

Arma sequens, varias per martia praemia terra
Vidi, Bellonae laude strategus eram.

His Catholic sympathies too explain his strange cargo and behaviour. This was the period shortly before the Armada, when James VI was secretly aiding Philip of Spain, while proclaiming allegiance to the Protestant cause. Montgomerie was almost certainly one of the Scottish pirates, encouraged by their king to give assistance to the Spaniards. This is what Thomas Duff may be referring to, when suggesting that Montgomerie pleased both James and Philip at once,

Regis et exstabam pergratus in arce Philippi,
Semper honoratus Rex Jacobe tibi.

Yet just as Elizabeth could offer Drake no protection in the event of capture, James could not officially condone piracy in the Catholic cause. The papers Montgomerie was going to present to the authorities could only give a general protection. They could not justify his cargo nor his strange behaviour. As Cecil was keen to extirpate piracy of this kind, the poet's imprisonment may well have resulted from this incident.

Significantly there is a gap before the next relevant document. This is dated March 1589. It is a letter to William Humberston, written in the French town of St. Omer and refers to the political situation in the Low Countries at that time.

Next day the Spanish infantry and 2,000 others marched without baggage "towards your coast there." His friend is still in France, so he cannot learn their purpose. Great (noise) of Gitternebergen. Six companies of horse sent thither. Captain Montgomery, a Scot, who lately came from thence with intelligence, is hurried back thither by way of Holland.³

Gitternebergen (or Geertruidenberg) was one of three major defence bastions in the Low Countries. It was at this period held by the States General and England together. Disagreement between these allies had however produced considerable friction. The States General under Count Maurice of Holland felt that Elizabeth was ignoring her duties in the

² *Calendar of Scottish Papers*, 29th May, 1586, p. 410.

³ *Calendar of State Papers (Foreign)*, Jan-July, 1589, p. 189.

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Low Countries in her enthusiasm for the counter-armada against Spain. Elizabeth for her part claimed that Maurice and his supporters ignored the authority of her lieutenant-general, whenever it opposed their own plans. Various problems arose from this situation, not the least of which was disagreement over who should pay the defence garrisons. In Gitternebergen, lack of pay had led to a mutiny and the garrison in March 1589 was holding the town in the face of a determined siege by Count Maurice.

Montgomerie's appearance however assumes a new significance, when it is learned that the Spanish hoped to take advantage of this situation in order to hinder the counter-armada. If they could capture Gitternebergen, Elizabeth might be forced to withdraw troops to cope with the new crisis in the Low Countries. To this end the Spanish troops under the Duke of Parma were already encamped only a short distance from Gitternebergen, in Breda. What Humberston's correspondent has noted is the movement of Spanish reinforcements into Holland, presumably from ships lying off the north-west coast of France.

In the light of this information, Montgomerie's movements become logical. He has travelled from Gitternebergen to St. Omer with information. His route would necessarily pass through Breda, where he could confer with Parma. His journey to St. Omer then brings him very close to the French coast, where Spanish reinforcements were waiting. It looks as if he was acting as a link between the garrison, Parma and his reinforcements. Having done this he returned to Gitternebergen and almost immediately Parma walked into that town and possessed it for Spain. The garrison offered no resistance, a fact which suggests a previous agreement between them and Parma, possibly engineered by Montgomerie.

If it is accepted that Montgomerie may have been a free lance Catholic spy, there is further evidence that James condoned his activities. In 1586 he had issued the poet with a royal licence to visit "pairtis of flanderis, spane and utheris beyond sey."⁴ This is exactly the field of activity indicated by the Gravesend and Gitternebergen episodes. Knowing that Montgomerie had already been engaged in pro-Catholic ventures, James must have realised the motives behind the poet's request. That he granted the licence suggests his adherence to a policy of veiled Catholicism.

⁴ *Register of Privy Seal of Scotland*, Vol. 59, March, 1588, f 88a.

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This evidence suggests that the Ailsa Craig conspiracy was not the only occasion on which Montgomerie ranged himself against the forces of Protestantism. He may well have been both pirate and spy on the Catholic behalf before that incident.

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