

William Francis Forbes-Sempill, *Honorary Fellow*

19th Baron Sempill (Created 1489)
24th September 1893—30th December 1965
President 1927—1930

"All places, all airs, make unto me one country."

Lord Sempill taught me so much during and after his years of Presidency of the Society that I am biased and declare that the good he did for the Society in those years will not be buried with his bones, but told in the archives of the Society's history for all members to read when fantastic speeds of aircraft are no longer the false gods of aeronautical progress.

When Sempill retired from the Presidency in 1930, the Patrons of the Society, H.R.H. the Prince of Wales (now the Duke of Windsor) and H.R.H. the Duke of York (later King George VI) sent messages, the only ones ever sent to a President that I can remember, by Royal Patrons.

"I hear that you are on the point of retiring under the rules," wrote the Prince of Wales. "I have followed with interest the work of the Society during your period of office, and know that much of the progress made of late has been due to your constant zeal for the Society's welfare and your energy on its behalf. Edward, Prince of Wales." The Duke of York also paid him tribute.

In October 1930 Richard Fairey gave his Presidential address on "The Growth of Aviation" to the Society. The Master of Sempill was in the Chair. Fairey began, "I want to say that of all the Presidents I served, Sempill must stand out as having been one of the greatest for what he did to help the Society during some very critical years, in face, too, of opposition which was not always openly declared."

Fairey himself was about to begin his Presidential duties, which were to add much to what Sempill had done. In later years, Sir Roy Fedden, another great President of the Society who fought for years to raise its standards, paid his own tribute.

"I have had the privilege of knowing William Sempill for just on forty years, since the early days of the First World War. He served his apprenticeship with an engine firm, Rolls-Royce at Derby. He joined the Royal Flying Corps in 1914. In 1916 he was transferred to the Royal Naval Air Service and in 1918 was a Colonel in the Royal Air Force and went to America that year with Sir Sefton Brancker and Sir Henry Fowler on a technical advisory commission to the American Government."

Fedden gave him much praise and added "I have never known any one who has told so many countries what is the best thing in aviation."

Sempill was not always approved by the British Government.

In 1921 he went to Japan, taking with him a number of officers who had served in the RNAS, and advised the Japanese Government in the organisation, equipment and training of their Naval Air Service. He gave similar advice to Greece, Sweden and Norway, Chili, Brazil and the Argentine. He had a wide theoretical knowledge and practical experience in aviation. While he was President he flew in over a hundred light aircraft and gave many lectures.

Of him, C. G. Grey wrote, "Sempill was as energetic and ubiquitous as could be. Just how he managed to do so much for British aviation without fee or reward besides all the hard work he puts into his own business, is one of life's



mysteries. He has made the Royal Aeronautical Society in the past three years into a real power after the members had become as lethargic as the population of the Silence Room in the Athenaeum Club."

Sempill joined the Society in 1917. Among those who were members were T. O. M. Sopwith, Geoffrey de Havilland, F. W. Lanchester, Handley Page, Leonard Baird, and others whose reputations are well known, fifty years later. The paying membership at the beginning of the year was nevertheless not 300.

Less than four years after becoming a member, Sempill was co-opted on the Council.

He was elected Chairman of the Council in 1926, and President in 1927, being re-elected in 1928, 1929 and 1930. During those years he took the Chair at all meetings of the Council and lectures to the Society (137 in all) save two.

The Society was blessed in the years he served on the Council, for he was a flying President—who made journeys to many countries and always took the opportunity to extol the great Society he loved and guided so well. As the President, on visits to his friends, he flew to their houses rather than taking a car. He had learnt to fly in 1912 and often drew attention to the cost of running a light aeroplane as against a car. He brought much pleasure in the flights he gave to those whom he visited, often accompanied by his own family.

He flew in the King's Cup Race round Great Britain in 1924 and 1925-26-27-28- and 1929. He flew to Berlin to lecture in 1925 and the following year flew from end to end of Great Britain in his DH Moth, from Land's End to John O'Groats, the first time the flight had been made in such a light aeroplane, in a quarter of the time it took to go by train. Sempill got more fun flying in those days, when he could see where he was going and talk about what he had seen, something the majority of those who now fly cannot do, flying so fast, so much above the clouds and so much at the direction and permission of authority, that most passengers are glad when the flight is over so that they can see some of the country they have flown to see!

How many fliers at the present day could write, as Sempill did, "The magnificent scenery of Cornwall, the

cliff scenery in particular, is seen to the best advantage from the air, and the colours of the sea appear far more vivid. I set a course up the Cornish coast, passing such well known towns as St. Ives, Padstow, Tintagel, Bude, Clovelly and Ilfracombe. The weather was wonderfully clear and Lundy Island could be seen plainly from South Cornwall . . ." and so on to Greta Green and John O'Groats.

"There are very good landing grounds in the vicinity of Greta Green, so that if the Moth becomes used for romantic purposes there will be no difficulty in landing at this famous spot."

Sempill was not easily swayed by ideas or proposals with which he did not agree. He was a Scot with a long and exciting history of many hundreds of years of adventurous ancestors behind him. He loved Scotland.

"Contrary to popular belief," he once declared, "the mountainous regions of Scotland present little real obstacles to the modern aeroplane. My flight from Land's End to John O'Groats has laid a bogey which was ever present in the minds of those who gave any thought to the subject of aviation in the upper half of Scotland. My experiences of flying in Scotland have brought home the fact with double force." That was written with Scottish conviction forty years ago when he was more at home in Scotland flying than many modern pilots with much better aircraft.

He was in constant demand to express his ideas for the future. "The long distance routes are without question the most useful for industry. If British Business is wasting time by not using the air to the fullest extent, and is wasting money as well, that amounts to a crime when we are fighting for world trade."

Sempill wrote these words for publication in 1927 backed with cogent comments. In everything Sempill had only one thought in those days, a dominating one, the aeroplane in all its functions, war and peace, flying loads all over the world, imports and exports, travel by one part of the world to another for pleasure, new sights and experiences in lands of new peoples.

In the summer of 1928, following the Royal Air Force display at Hendon, he came out in an attack on defence.

"Our traditional love of the sea, our confidence in an incomparable Navy, render it difficult indeed for any Government to appear niggardly in its dealings with the Senior Service. But the fact will have to be faced sooner or later—and the sooner the better—that this policy simply means the expenditure of vast sums upon fighting units which in future warfare are bound to prove far too vulnerable.

"The whole problem of national defence has changed during the last fifteen or twenty years. The insular security which has meant so much to us in the past, received its death blow when in 1909 Bleriot flew across the Straits of Dover. The old view of defence, with all sorts of associations, some of them merely sentimental, remained. And they are with us yet.

"As it is, there is a deplorable lack of balance in our expenditure. In spite of optimistic speeches and reassuring statements, which are entirely unjustified by events, we have to face the disquieting fact that our expenditure on national defence leaves us exposed to the most deadly attack of all—that from the air.

"Clearly, then, the first step towards economy in national defence lies in our getting a sense of proportion, and using our money to the best effect, ruthlessly excluding partisan interests and sentimental considerations, however strong, and realising that as the air is now our first line of defence it must have the first—and not the last—call on the national exchequer."

That was written by the President of the Society nearly forty years ago and published on 1st July 1928.

The demands on the JOURNAL of the Society make it quite impossible to pay full account and justice to the work and inspiration of many of its leading members, and this is particularly the case in the memoirs which are now being printed. Sempill covered so much for the Society that can only be touched upon in later years.

He was President of the Gliding Association; in 1941-42 President of the Junior Institution of Engineers; and from 1935-37 President of the Institution of Production Engineers.

In the autumn of ending his years of the Presidency of the Society he made a long and successful tour in a Puss Moth seaplane in Scandinavia and the Baltic ending up in a flight across the North Sea from Stavanger to Cruden Bay, near Aberdeen. A few years before, two days before Christmas, he set off in a Moth for a demonstration tour of the Irish Free State, flying direct from Stag Lane to Dublin over the 70 miles of open water from Holyhead, the route first flown by Robert Loraine in 1910 in a Farman biplane. On his arrival he was met by Sir Sefton Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation. The tour of Ireland was most successful and at its end Sempill flew his machine back in foggy weather by the short sea route, landing on a sand-bank off the Lancashire coast to fill up his tank with tins of petrol he carried with him. In due course the Free State Government ordered four Moths for delivery to Dublin!

One of his most exciting flights was in the Kronfeld Super Drone, a single-seater machine of under 200 kg empty weight and fitted with a motor cycle engine. He flew it from Croydon to Berlin and back in 1936 and set up an international distance record. The cost for petrol on the flight out to Berlin was fifteen shillings and a little less back to Croydon. Speed 60 mph, eleven hours out and nine hours coming back, thanks to a gale! He had flown a Bluebird from the Welsh Harp to Aberdeen and on to the Berlin Air Show previously.

There is so much that could be told about this great President who set such flying precedents for the Royal Aeronautical Society. He did so much for starting the Branches of the Society and for giving me such sound ideas for the rules; and encouraged J. E. Hodgson, the Honorary Librarian of the Society to prepare the great exhibit of the Society at the Air Exhibition at Olympia in 1929; for the help he gave me when I went to America in 1930 to be given a dinner and a first class time in return for a talk to some of their leading designers of aircraft and aircraft engines and researchers on how the British Aeronautical Society worked. From that came the Anglo-American conferences in later years, and contacts and friendships which have been invaluable.

When the Council announced Sempill's retirement they, and those who had served him for his years on the Council, unanimously decided to pay him "The signal honour of a special dinner on his retirement and at the same time give him a permanent souvenir of their appreciation of his untiring energy and devoted services on behalf of the Society."

Sempill was a very religious man, and I end this far too short a memoir with a reference which has nothing to do with him, which happened when he was taking the Chair at a Society's lecture. He was often referred to as being an exceptionally fine Chairman on these occasions. On this occasion, after considerable praise had been given to the lecturer and the lecturer, followed by similar praise of one another by friends who took part in the discussion, an able Air Ministry official began "A chorus of praise has a monotony which is tolerable only in Heaven."

J. LAURENCE PRITCHARD, *Honorary Fellow*