



## 'Francis Joseph Bigger (1863-1926)'

McBrinn, J. (2016). 'Francis Joseph Bigger (1863-1926)'. In *Ulster Political Lives, 1886-1921*, edited by James Quinn and Patrick Maume (pp. 49-52). Royal Irish Academy.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

### **Published in:**

Ulster Political Lives, 1886-1921, edited by James Quinn and Patrick Maume

### **Publication Status:**

Published (in print/issue): 01/10/2016

### **Document Version**

Author Accepted version

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**BIGGER, Francis Joseph** (1863-1926), solicitor, author, antiquary, cultural revivalist, nationalist, patron of the arts, and Celtic Revival polymath, was born in Belfast on the 17 July 1863, the seventh son of Joseph Bigger of Belfast, and Mary Jane (née Ardery) Bigger of Ballyvalley. F.J. Bigger was educated briefly in Liverpool, where his father worked for a short time, and from 1874 at Belfast Academical Institute. In 1880 he enrolled to study law at Queen's College, Belfast and in 1884 studied briefly in Dublin. In 1885 he was articled to Messrs. Henry and William Seeds, and in 1887 he qualified as a solicitor. In 1889 Bigger opened a practice in partnership with George Strahan, whom he had met in Dublin, at Rea's Buildings, Royal Avenue, Belfast.

Aside from his work as a solicitor Bigger's earliest interests, which included Irish history and antiquities as well as the natural sciences, would occupy much of his life. In 1884 he joined the Belfast Naturalists' Field Club (BNFC), which encouraged his interests and where he learnt Irish. Under Bigger's direction, as Secretary and then President, the BNFC became more actively involved in archaeological and folklore study. In 1888 he was elected member of Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, becoming a Fellow in 1896. In 1894 had had been elected a member of the Royal Irish Academy. Bigger also joined the Gaelic League, becoming a member of its Coisde Gniotha, which brought him into contact with Douglas Hyde [q.v.] and Eoin McNeill [q.v.], who would influence many of his ideas.

Bigger's political beliefs, cultural interests and social connections lead him naturally to approach a political career, which seems to have been curtailed by the events of 1916 and the death of friends such as Roger Casement and Patrick Pearse as well as his increasing isolation amongst Ulster Unionists. Although Bigger's political career was unrealised his cultural activities have left an enduring legacy. His work can be divided into three broad areas; as a writer of books and articles; as an organiser and promoter of social and cultural events and activities; and as a heritage conservationist.

As a writer Bigger was prolific by any standards, producing in excess four hundred articles alone. As well as being a contributor to Irish antiquarian journals and several daily newspapers, and he was also a prolific editor. In 1894 he revived the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, and later helped J.S. Crone to establish *The Irish Book Lover*. Several of his articles were issued as pamphlets, including his controversial 'The Hills of

Holy Ireland' lecture (1907). His projected series of books on *The Northern Leaders of '98* remained unfinished. He also wrote numerous articles on his two favourite past times, gardening and bee keeping.

Bigger saw his role as promoter of all things Irish, and was involved in the revival of numerous processions, pageants, ceilidhs and feiseanna. His projects were similar in many ways to the European 'to the people' movement and possess some affinity, with their emphasis on the betterment of the urban poor and rural peasantry by rescuing folk traditions, to the culturally philanthropic projects of Ruskin and Morris. Bigger's ideas and endeavours were encouraged by Rev. George Hill and Father O'Laverty, and compared to the work of Petrie, Ferguson, O'Curry and O'Donovan. The National Romanticism spirit, which pervades Bigger's life and work, links him with several other key Celtic Revivalists, such as Patrick Pearse [q.v.] and Patrick Geddes.

Bigger was a founder member of the Ulster Literary Theatre, the Irish Folk Song Society, the Irish Peasant Home Industries, the Ulster Public House Association and schemes for improved labourers cottages, as well as serving as a committee member of the Belfast Art Society and the Irish Decorative Art Association. He was a patron of the Dun Emer Guild, The Craftworkers, and The Irish Art Companions, as well as numerous individual artists, poets and musicians. The year 1898 saw many of Bigger's interests in history, art, literature and politics coalesce in one single event, the Belfast Gaelic League pageant to mark the centenary of 1798. He also helped organise the Irish Harp Festival of 1903 and the Samuel Ferguson Centenary in 1910. One of Bigger's greatest achievements was the founding of the Feis na nGleann in 1904, which attracted assistance from the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, who realising Bigger's skills, enlisted him in organisation the Irish exhibit for the 1904 St. Louis Fair.

As a conservationist he was keen to restore what was left of Ulster's heritage. His enterprises uncovered unique Pre-Reformation sculpture and medieval stained glass, and funded restorations of several ancient monasteries and monuments. His greatest achievement was the restoration of the Elizabethan tower-house Castle Seán in Ardglass which became a model building of the Celtic Revival and a meeting place for many of its most prominent figures. Bigger also attempted to locate, re-locate or mark the graves of several national figures such as St. Patrick, Robert Emmet and Henry Joy McCracken.

In July 1926 Bigger was conferred with an M.A. from Queen's University, Belfast in recognition of his services to archaeology and local history. In August he went on a research trip to trace the steps of Irish saints from Lindisfarne, Whitby and the Low Countries, but returned home early after falling ill. He died on 9 December 1926 at Ard Righ and was buried in the Bigger family plot at Mullusk two days later.

Obituary – *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 6 ser., vol. xvii, (1927), 73; F.J. Bigger, *The Northern Leaders of '98 No. 1: Remember Orr* (1906), *The Holy Hills of Ireland* (1907), *Four Shots from Down* (1918), *Crossing the Bar* (1926); J.S. Crone and F.C. Bigger (eds), *In Remembrance: Articles and Sketches: Biographical, Historical, Topographical by Francis Joseph Bigger M.A., M.R.I.A., F.R.S.A.I.* (1927); Roger Dixon, 'Francis Bigger, Ulster's Don Quixote', *Ulster Folklife*, 43 (1997), 40-47; Joseph McBrinn, 'The Peasant and Folk Art Revival in Ireland, 1890-1920: with special reference to Ulster', *Ulster Folklife*, 48 (2002), 14-69.

Joseph McBrinn

900 words