

THE IRISH TIMES

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Ardrigh — a house imbued with 'the Gaelic spirit'

By Patrick Scott

"ARDRIGH" is to be demolished today. In the mountain of rubble, bricks and timber lies a large piece of Belfast's Gaelic history.

For over a century the Victorian villa, on a picturesque site on the Antrim Road overlooking Belfast Lough and directly under the historical MacArt's Fort on the Cave Hill, was the home of the Bigger family.

The Biggers, in the 300 years of their residence in this part of Antrim, made good in business and in agriculture, and contributed to the cultural development of Belfast. The first of the clan, three brothers, crossed from Nithsdale, Dumfries, in 1637 in search of better opportunities in commerce and better land.

They prospered in both spheres, had an entry in High Street named after them and a large townland in the northern suburbs of the city renamed "Biggerstown." Lowland Scot in origin, Presbyterian in faith — though one section became Church of Ireland and one member, Joseph Gillis Bigger MP, became a Catholic — they preserved an independence in their political outlook. Some members supported McCracken at the Battle of Antrim in '98 and Catholic Emancipation.

The two best known of the Biggers in modern times were cousins: Joseph Gillis Bigger, MP for Cavan, IRB friend of Parnell and master of the technique of parliamentary obstruction; and Francis Joseph Bigger, MA, MRJA, FRSA, the third of the Bigger generation to be a seventh son — lawyer, antiquarian, historian, litterateur and helper of anyone working for the development of Irish culture and language, like his cousin Sir Samuel Ferguson.

Until his death on 9th December, 1926, at the age of 63 — the last Bigger to live in Ardrigh — his house was the cultural centre for anyone interested in Irish tradition. His generosity and help in this won from the Belfast poet Joseph Campbell this description:

*"The lordliest type of mortal
Irishman
It has been my lot to know"*

A number of active Irish-minded families lived and worked from homes on the Antrim Road, Belfast, in the last decades of the last century. There were the veteran Robert Johnston, the Fenian

leader and his daughter, the poet Ethna Carbery; Seaton Milligan, the antiquarian, and his daughter Ahee, the poet; Mrs Margaret Pender, the novelist, and Francis Joseph Bigger; Bulmer Hobson, the youthful Quaker and Gaelic enthusiast.

They were all caught up in the literary revival and an enthusiasm for the Irish language, traditions, national awareness. Francis Joseph Bigger was one of the enthusiasts. He collected traditions of the Presbyterian men of the '98 "rising out" from descendants in Mallusk, Ballyclare, Ballyboley, Farranshane; joined the Gaelic League and was a member of the Coisde Gnoitha; president of the Coiste Ceanntair, Bealfeirste, edited and contributed to the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*; preserved ancient sites monuments, especially the broken medieval crosses in Downpatrick and Dromore, Shane's Castle, Ardglass, the statue of Our Lady of Dansford, Co Down; the large granite slab over St Patrick's reputed grave at Downpatrick.

For this Queen's University awarded him the degree of MA.

Ardrigh, at an interesting period of Irish cultural and political renaissance, the first two decades of this century, was a centre in which enthusiastic workers were welcome. There, and at Murloch Cottage, Ballycastle, Co Antrim, Bulmer Hobson, Denis McCullough, Robert Lynd, Desmond Fitzgerald, Ethna Carberry, Alice Milligan (both editors of the *Sean Van Vocht*), Sean Lester, Mrs Stopford Green, Mrs Margaret Pender, the Morrow brothers were guests at discussions, meetings, ceili.

At these, John O'Reilly, the blind uileann piper was brought by Bigger from Galway to encourage pipe-playing in Belfast and to teach Young Frank "Da" MacPeake the art of uileann pipe playing.

A special guest was Roger Casement — a friend of the Bigger family — who spent his leave at Ardrigh and Murloch — and on his retirement worked with Hobson and Lynd and Bigger rekindling interest in the Gaelic League and feiseanna in Antrim, Derry and Donegal.

"Da" MacPeake told me that on one summer's evening, before a ceili in Ardrigh, Roger Casement came into the garden in front of the house in which the

perfume from roses and golden-rayed lilies filled, the air, and walked slowly, slightly bent, looking pensively at the ground, on a path through the tropical growth of plants.

"He stopped when he came where I was playing a Co Antrim air and said 'Francie, would you play for me 'The Little Red Fox' and 'The Castle of Dromore' and moved slowly away still thoughtfully looking at the ground." He was particularly fond of "The Castle of Dromore" as sung by Cathal O'Byrne.

Bigger wore the saffron kilt with the Ulster contingent in 1910 to the Pan Celtic Congress and "Da" MacPeake played rousing Irish airs on the pipes at the site of the Battle of Fontenoy.

After 1916 Bigger concentrated more and more on collecting manuscripts, books, reminiscences and in writing. His vast library grew. The events in Ireland especially in Belfast saddened him — he was opposed to violence. Casement was dead, so were many of his guests who enjoyed the hospitality of Ardrigh; others were scattered. He died on December 9th, 1926. At his own request his funeral to Mallusk cemetery was private. Over his grave, 20 feet from that of Jemie Hope, a large Celtic cross was erected. It was blown up and smashed by the UDA early in the 1970s.

Ardrigh — the house was originally named Ardreagh after his mother Mary Ardreagh of Banbridge — but by association it was named by the Irish guests and friends Ard Righ.

After Francis Joseph Bigger's death, Ardrigh was bought by Joseph Devlin MP, but, after a few years, he moved to a house on the Antrim Road nearer the city.

With new owners the house was converted into flats. The lovely gardens, with the richest stock of tropical plants and bird life, became the sites for two villas, and later several others. The house in which Francie MacPeake's uilleann pipes set the feet of guests tapping, and the singing of Herbert Hughes' songs set the rafters ringing, fell empty and decayed.

"It would take £30,000 to put it right again. I've had the condition of every room photographed to prove that it was beyond repair," said the developer. Six luxury flats will rise on the site which

Ardrigh House, the former home of F. J. Bigger, on the Antrim Road, Belfast, which will be demolished today. Formerly it was surrounded by well-tended gardens and trees. — (Photograph: Matt Kavanagh)

will always be known as Ardrigh, the house of Francis Joseph Bigger who to Joseph Campbell was:

*"The brown-faced quiet
mannered human man,
Whose noble mind was*

*mirrored in his eyes,
Who loved his people and the
land that bore him."*

Another man wrote — "With no Gaelic blood, he was full of the Gaelic spirit and would have restored the Gaelic ascendancy

with the same enthusiasm as that with which he restored the old castle at Ardglass and the old high crosses he repaired and re-erected."

He bequeathed most of his books to Belfast central library.