**Lost and Found: In Search of Owen Roe O’Neill**

[Hiram Morgan](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/hiram-morgan/),

Fri 18 May 2012, 10:13am

[17](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/#comments)

<http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/>

Maybe you can help me with a little piece of research? Recently an authentic image of Hugh O’Neill, the great earl of Tyrone, was discovered in a fresco in the Vatican but one of his nephew Owen Roe remains elusive. His story, dying in Castle Oughter County Cavan in command of an intact Ulster army as Cromwell advanced across Ireland, is full of fanciful potential.

As a successful commander in the Spanish army, Don Eugenio, as he was known, would almost certainly have been the subject of a portrait whilst on the continent. It has been said that he should be one of the figures on the Spanish side in 1625 in Velasquez’s famous surrender of Breda but that painting was a studio mock-up done in Madrid ten years later.

On the other hand the remarkable defence Owen Roe conducted as governor of Arras in 1640 holding off a French army of 35,000 with only 1,500 men would certainly have attracted painters and engravers but no such contemporary image has yet come to light.

￼Instead for a portrait we have one of the most romanticised images in nationalist history – a middle-aged Owen Roe O’Neill depicted in profile bright-eyed, bearded wearing an Irish mantle and bejewelled bonnet. This is not how an elite hispaniolized Irishman would have dressed. It seems more like a deliberate exercise in nostalgia and national image creation.

Already the subject of the evocative ‘Lament for the death of Owen Roe O’Neill’ ballad by Thomas Davis, this reputed image of him quickly caught the public imagination when it first appeared as a lithograph in the 1856 edition of the Ulster Journal of Archaeology.

It had been sourced in County Derry where it was ‘faithfully copied’ from a small oil painting owned by an old lady who was a ‘lineal descendant of Owen Roe’. The back of the painting bore a half-obliterated inscription – ‘Owen Roe O’Neill at the Court of…by the celebrated Dutch artist, Van Brugens’.

The best I can do for this artist is an obscure portraitist and miniaturist – Louis Van Der Bruggens – who died in Paris in 1658 having worked mainly at the French Court. The 1856 lithograph was not in colour but the subject’s hair was reported to be ruddy rather than straight red and his bonnet blue.

No one stopped to wonder why the Irish hero was wearing a Scottish bonnet. Weren’t his chief enemies whilst in Ulster – Munro’s Scots – known as ‘the blue bonnets’? And although he is shown in the symbolic Irish mantle, under it he is sporting a round-necked Roman tunic.

None of this is very convincing as a claim to authenticity. In 1879 Sir John Gilbert, librarian of the Royal Irish Academy, reported that the painting had been inherited by Alexander Falls Henry of Maghera. This country solicitor died five years later. In the middle of the twentieth century, the costume historian H.F. McClintock searched for his descendants but found neither them nor the portrait.

Its whereabouts, if still exists, is unknown.

In 1996 I put out a call for the painting in the pages of History Ireland without any success. Then more recently I learned that the last male of the Henry family had emigrated to Melbourne in Australia towards the end of the 19th century, allegedly taking the portrait and a signet ring of the Emperor Napoleon with him as a family heirlooms.

As a result I asked Irish-Australian historians Mary and Val Noone to conduct a search, but to no avail as they were unable to find any record of the painting, the family itself having died out in 1950. The last information that I have is that the Belfast antiquarian Francis Joseph Bigger may have acquired the painting and that, if it managed to survive Loyalist vandalism of his property at Castle Jordan in County Down, it would, following his death in 1926, have either been sold off privately by his common law wife and housekeeper, Brigid Mathews, or been given away by his brother Joseph Warwick Bigger, a Dublin Surgeon.

The story though doesn’t end there. On a visit to Dom Hugo O’Neill, the current Clandeboye O’Neill in Portugal, I discovered that he had a painting of Owen Roe O’Neill. It was remarkably similar to the image in the lithograph, though the subject in it has dark-brown hair, a green bonnet, a red-hand insignia and an inscription which reads:

‘EXCELLENTISSIMO ET FAMOSISSIMO D. EVGENIO HEREDITARIO JURE PRINCIPI O’NEILL COPIARUM CATHOLICARUM HIBERNENSIVM VLTONIAE ARCHISTRATEGO. OBIIT A.D. MCCIL. VI NOVEMBRI’.

The latter indicated two things – it was making extravagant claims about Owen Roe being hereditary prince of Ulster and secondly that it was decidedly posthumous. It is definitely not the lost County Derry painting because the UJA had measured it at the time of lithographing at 12 ins by 16. This one in Portugal is larger.

According to Dom Hugo, his painting of Owen Roe was acquired when a family settlement was made with the heir to Paris-based Comtes of Tyrone in 1900. It would be nice to think that this is the original of the Derry painting but it is a far more likely to be a copy not of that lost portrait but an enhanced version of the famous lithograph.

In which event the search must go on for a true likeness of Owen Roe. And indeed for the lost County Derry portrait. So if you are perhaps a relative of the Henry family, who supplied the first Lord Chief Justice of NI after partition, or if your ancestors acquired any of the Bigger collection, I would appreciate you checking your attic for a wee painting which probably doesn’t like much now but may be the only portrait of the last great general of the Ulster Irish.

*This piece is derived from an article in the latest edition of Dúiche Néill: the journal of the O’Neill Country Historical Society.*

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**Comments (17)**

1. *Framer (*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/frame/)*)*

[18 May 2012 at 11:56 am](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1082166)

A great deal of satisfying historical detail and proper scepticism of romantic images and legends here. Now for the inaccuracies I know about or information I was not aware of:

Senator Joseph Warwick Bigger (TCD Professor of Bacteriology) was the nephew of Francis Joseph Bigger (FJB) not his brother. It was he who disclosed how they both burned Casement’s 1914 diary (and presumably related correspondence) and was duly threatened by Patrick McCartan (latterly of Clann na Poblachta): “I hope to get Sean Russell or some of the boys to visit Bigger and give him some ‘friendly advice’. He had no right to stick his nose in here.”

Brigid Mathews was indeed FJB’s housekeeper at Ardrigh on the Antrim Road but most certainly was not his common law wife. If anyone came close to that role it was his chauffeur Tom.

It was also rumoured, unfairly, that FJB “was interested in the boy scout movement…the Greeks had a name for Francis Joseph Bigger’s habits and that he needed none to show him how to scout for boys” (WJ Maloney).

FJB, a solicitor and antiquarian, certainly cultured boys into romantic nationalism and separatism in Belfast (like Herbert Hughes, the musician) but there is no evidence of related misdemeanour.

Castle Seán in Ardglass (FJB’s renovated country home) was later granted to the government of Northern Ireland by Joseph Bigger, on condition that no flag decorate it save one bearing the “Red Right Hand of Ulster on a white ground,” to be flown on 17 July – FJB’s birthday. The building was then, accurately if unromantically, renamed by officials ‘Jordan’s Castle’.

Joseph Bigger inherited the bulk of FJB’s estate (will in PRONI) aside from an annuity for Bridget.

I’d be interested as to when, and how extensive, the later loyalist vandalism was, and is the flag properly flown on 17 July?

1. *anne warren (*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/annewarren/)*)*

[18 May 2012 at 1:38 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1082207)

Footnote to Ardrigh House
Ardrigh (pronounced ard ree) the Irish for High King

It became a meeting place for Irish cultural enthusiasts from every section of Belfast society. F.J. Bigger possessed a rare gift, that of engendering great loyalty in others. This allowed all those who shared a love of Irish culture to meet under the auspices of Ardrigh and commune across conflicting traditions and beliefs. Local artists, writers, musicians, Irish linguists and antiquarians would regularly gather in his extensive library at Ardrigh in order to discuss and celebrate all things Irish. The historian Roger Dixon has written that, in its time, it was known as ‘the most hospitable house in Ireland’.

In 1986, after many years of neglect, Bigger’s house at 737b Antrim Road was demolished. A modern development of private flats, Ardrigh Court, now stands in its place.

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1. [*SeaanUiNeill*](http://www.ardrighbooks.com) *(*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/seaanuineill/)*)*

[19 May 2012 at 11:07 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1082727)

Oh Dear! All the old canards from “Framer.” It’s really such a pity that no-one appears to have listened to anyone who was actually among “Bigger’s boys” (and a not inconsiderable number of girls who just don’t seem to have got a mention!) and actually participated in his “fireside university” or were among the crowds of young people who flocked to Castle Sean for long weekends. I grew up with my grandfather’s stories about Ardrigh. He was there for a few years before 1914, invited by his friend Joseph Campbell (Seosamh MacCathmhaoil) the poet.

Brigid had been Bigger’s mother’s maid and was well known to have taken her deathbed promise in 1906 to “look after Frank” seriously enough to share his bed for much of the remainder of his life. When Alice Stopford Green was feeling her way towards possibly coming to live at Ardrigh and sounding out the possibility of marriage about 1910 Brigid warned her off in no uncertain terms. Frank Bigger was already well and truly “taken.” This relationship was well known to anyone who visited Ardrigh although Bigger’s ongoing concern to form creative “Irish Ireland” elite from all of those talented young people he could influence gave rise to the innuendos that Framer describes that rapidly developed among those excluded from the charmed circle.

The will he speaks of at PRONI contains a simple bequest to two relatives, his nephew Joseph Warwick Bigger. A codicil on 20th May 1926 revoked the appointment of his brother Frederic Charles Bigger as an executor, as they had recently quarrelled over politics, although anecdotally, Fredric Charles assisted his nephew to wind up Bigger’s affairs in 1927 unofficially. Most of the will outlines a gift of cash and an annuity for Brigid along with the contents of her room and the gift of up to £100 worth of items from the house. Bigger was attempting to ensure that Brigid was looked after without incurring any scandal. There is an existing list among the papers of the Bigger archive at the Belfast Central Library which details the items that Brigid requested. While it does not contain direct mention of the Owen Roe painting, there are several poorly described items that just may be the painting.

Brigid was not the only beneficiary. Bigger had avoided problems of possible conflicting demands by asking his executor to make gifts to his friends, without stipulating anything of this in the will itself. Anecdotally, numerous members of his broad circle of friends were given the choice of books or other small items. I have a book my grandfather was given. The framed flint arrowheads at the Ballycastle Museum were returned to the carver Stephen Clarke who had crafted the frame at this time also. This dispersal of gifts was carried out over February and March of 1927, well before the executors began to settle terms for the archive of historical books and papers to be gifted to the Belfast Central Library after QUB and the Linen Hall Library had refused to consider the families requirement to hold the archive as a single catalogued collection. The collections of books on Irish cultural themes that now comprise part of the archive were separated as “out of bounds.”

A number of items were also left at Castle Sean and ended up being sent to the Ulster Museum. Many of the antiquities were absorbed into the collection without any reference as to their provenance. As Castle Sean was the last place where the Owen Roe painting was known to have been kept, Hiram Morgan has, I know, checked as to whether the Museum received it at this time. The surmise that either Brigid or another friend or colleague of Frank Bigger may have ended up with the painting is based on the fact that it appears to have vanished at some point between Bigger’s death and the gifting of his personal possessions to friends, of his archive to the Central Library, and of his paintings and antiquities to various state institutions. The catalogue of the house clearance at Ardrigh in September 1927 has a number of items that are so vaguely described as to offer the possibility that they may also be the painting, but I was told that very little was moved from Castle Sean to Ardrigh for the sale. The executors appear to have thought that the paintings and artefacts at castle Sean were valueless. Also, a number of items deemed to be nationalist may have been destroyed in mid-January 1927 when a small company of loyalists broke the door of Castle Sean and destroyed as much as they could. My uncle, a boy of five, accompanied my grandfather to Castle Sean shortly after this attack and vividly described the chaos, with any canvas paintings broken or slashed, including the life-size painting by Harry Morrow of Shane O’Neill that dominated the room on the second floor and which had been slashed across vertically several times.

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1. [*SeaanUiNeill*](http://www.ardrighbooks.com) *(*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/seaanuineill/)*)*

[19 May 2012 at 11:11 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1082735)

The sentence at the begining of my third paragraph should read:

“The will he (Framer) speaks of at PRONI contains a simple bequest to two relatives, his nephew Joseph Warwick Bigger and his brother Frederic Charles Bigger.”

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1. [*SeaanUiNeill*](http://www.ardrighbooks.com) *(*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/seaanuineill/)*)*

[19 May 2012 at 11:18 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1082737)

Thank you Anne Warren for the comments on FJB. I’m just surprised you failed to mention their source:

<http://www.ardrighbooks.com/fjb.html>

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1. *anne warren (*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/annewarren/)*)*

[20 May 2012 at 12:36 am](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1082777)

Your’re quite right Seaan.

I should have added the link.

I realised I had forgotten to as I was switching off my PC to go out. I hadn’t time to boot up, search for the site again and add it.

Hope you will forgive me!!

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1. [*SeaanUiNeill*](http://www.ardrighbooks.com) *(*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/seaanuineill/)*)*

[20 May 2012 at 9:08 am](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1082850)

Forgiven, but I think it helps to see the article in its entirety. Alice Stopford Green’s comments in her Bigger obituary are particularly important, and apply even more today as the kind of “historical amnesia” that Bigger was struggling against has become a general characteristic of our community. Even, as I was trying to show in my big posting, in the case of how he and Brigid are (mis) remembered. I quote from ASG’s conclusion:

“To him nothing of Ireland was dead. There must have been many who felt a new life kindled by his abrupt and startling phrases. In this generation, which lives practically without any historical background, we miss an Irishman whose range, if not scientific, was large and true. We do not yet realise how original was his life’s work…”

The rest is at the link.

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1. *anne warren (*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/annewarren/)*)*

[20 May 2012 at 12:05 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1082864)

To be honest I knew nothing of Bigger but I was interested in the house as I believe I visited it when it was in the hands of later owners before demolition.

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1. *Framer (*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/frame/)*)*

[21 May 2012 at 10:35 am](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1083071)

Proinnceas Seosamh Bigger’s output and effort was prodigious and we owe him a lot for his early conservationism. However too much of this material skates over his politics which were hard-line separatist, anglophobic, laced with saccharin romantic nationalism. Even the Linen Hall library banned him. He was responsible for the republicanising of many in Belfast – for good and evil and the Belfast-linked seeding of the Easter Rising.
Brigid Matthews, the housekeeper’s opposition to Alice Stopford Green moving in to Ardrigh was couched by Bigger in terms of the difficulty of having two women in charge of domestic matters.
Interestingly, if unrelatedly, Joe Devlin MP lived in Ardrigh in later years.

1. *anne warren (*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/annewarren/)*)*

[21 May 2012 at 8:00 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1083156)

Joseph Devlin, also known as Joe Devlin, (13 February 1871 – 18 January 1934)
Long, long before my time Framer

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1. [*SeaanUiNeill*](http://www.ardrighbooks.com) *(*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/seaanuineill/)*)*

[22 May 2012 at 11:39 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1083345)

Ah, Framer, even more rumour! Although there was a fracas over FJB’s “Holy Hills of Ireland” lecture, far from banning Bigger, after the application of his famous charm the miscreant enjoyed in succeeding years a perfectly friendly relationship with those at the Linen Hall Library who had been most scandalised. Have you read the printed version of the lecture? Pretty tame stuff, really. The celebrated rupture between Bigger and the Linen Hall Library lasted all of three weeks, as I was told the story. Bigger’s executors, following his own verbal instructions, approached the Linen Hall Library as the second institution sounded out as a possible repository for his archive in 1927. He even advised Alice Milligan to offer the Linen Hall Library her sister’s musical archive, containing the Bunting Manuscripts in 1916. Please, please, get your facts right.

I’m sorry that my material “skates over Bigger’s politics”. I was simply attempting to possible challenge the suggestion that Tom was Bigger’s common law wife and to shed some light on Bigger’s custodianship, and the possible fate, of the Owen Roe painting Hiram Morgan is attempting to locate.

But just a few words about Bigger’s politics as you’ve raised the issue. Bigger, despite what many would now wish to think, was never a physical force man. Romantic he may have seemed, but he was also a hardheaded lawyer with his feet firmly on the ground when he wasn’t drafting an article in his inimitable fin de siècle prose. His friend Roger Casement had experienced, and consequently fought against, similar dire cruelties to those perpetrated during the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland and during subsequent rebellions, during his own Congo investigations. The Irish historical experience had a profound reality for these men, something that went far beyond any saccharin romantic posturing. That Bigger remained a supporter of the moderate home rule of the National party and a firmly committed constitutionalist, who was not to be trusted with revolutionary plans by the hard liners, is a well attested fact that shows his great strength of character in an Ireland that became increasingly intoxicated with heady violence. Throughout his life Bigger retained a generous broadminded liberalism that many of his detractors can seldom claim themselves. He retained numerous strong friendships among the Unionist elite as well as in nationalist circles throughout his life. It is always dangerous to project the baggage separatism has acquired over a succeeding hundred years onto the convictions of figures from a very different past. It is, after all, another country, and they did things very differently…….

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1. *Framer (*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/frame/)*)*

[24 May 2012 at 12:04 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1083997)

Hardly ‘rumour’ Seaan – everything documented, with references available. And Francis Joseph Bigger would have been the first to admit he was partial to a bit of Republican militarism, and I don’t just mean his unbounded enthusiasm for the United Irishmen and their revolutionary activities which led to so many lost lives.
‘The Holy Hills Of Ireland’ lecture by Bigger at the Linen Hall Library was where he described England as “our most bitter enemy,” something the Library authorities called a pretext for “ventilating political prejudices…calculated to rouse party and political bitterness.” I don’t know how quickly that rupture was repaired but suspect it took longer than three weeks. My facts however are indisputable. He also condemned the Anglicising influences of the National Schools.

On New Year’s Eve 1913, Bigger organised an Irish Volunteer parade describing the event thus: “All the boys were present – some in kilts, others in old (1782) Volunteer uniform, fully equipped with rifles and pikes. They played A Nation Once Again from the pipes – then a quick march in fully drilled ranks down the (Antrim) road…in tense excitement.” The guest book at Castle Sean in 1916 is noticeable for names boldly marked “Irish Republican Army.”

Sorry but this is not the mark of someone who “was never a physical force man” unless he hurled from the ditch.

Both MI5 and the RIC were watching and noting his activities. He came to MI5’s attention after being mentioned by Roger Casement’s traitorous companion in Norway, Adler Christensen. MI5 noted: “Originally a ‘Protestant Home Ruler’ of the ordinary type…personally enthusiastic and unbalanced, although not lacking in a certain type of intelligence. All this makes it quite possible that the extreme party are using him as an unconscious tool…or at any rate as an ‘accommodation address’. He would be a very suitable agent to select for any gunrunning scheme.”

RIC intelligence in November 1914 told of movements at Ardrigh where his associates were “all extremists…Bigger is constantly visited by leading Sinn Féiners such as Bulmer Hobson, John MacDermott, Denis McCullough, Ernest Blythe and others. He has also been seen with James Connolly of the TWU. He does not bear a good moral character and is said to hate British rule.”
A dangerous antiquarian, Bigger may have done nothing more illegal than prevent the arrest of an IRA leader at Ardrigh but, as we know, accessories are as guilty as perpetrators.
Whether, like Yeats, he worried of Irish Volunteers, “Did words of mine / send those men to their deaths,” or indeed RIC men to theirs, is something worth pursuing, since he pulled in his horns later. He may indeed have maintained good relations with Unionists who perhaps saw him as harmless, even in 1916, as they probably never knew the level of his commitment to revolutionary separatism.

1. [*SeaanUiNeill*](http://www.ardrighbooks.com) *(*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/seaanuineill/)*)*

[25 May 2012 at 4:23 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1084175)

Well then, ‘rumour’ that has been dignified by having appeared in print. An historian should carefully ‘interrogate his sources,’ not sift out those juicy quotes that simply support his case. Keep reading.

I can still see nothing that contradicts Bigger’s well attested liberalism in a highly characteristic display of play acting on New Year’s Eve, 1913, when, note, the weapons you characterise as “rifles” were actually a bizarre range of rusted up muskets, etc, from the horde of antiquities usually hung on the walls of Castle Sean, as were the “1782 uniforms.” All rather more ‘Jacques Tati’ than scary ‘Republican funeral chic.’ And this little re-enactor display is something that shortly would be put into its real perspective when, just four months later, real German rifles were landed at Larne for other parading bodies which had also been organising at this time.

I seem to have noticed that Bigger’s “unbounded enthusiasm” for the 1798 Rebellion and for dressing up and parading is, even today, not unique to Republican circles. Even 1798 has now become something of a modern vogue among the Ulster Scots, having been enthusiastically espoused by David Hume and many, many others. I’ve even heard the Rebellion described as a “Presbyterian Holocaust.”

Nor can I find anything culpable in Bigger’s stanch loyalty and hospitality to those friends who may have held more extreme views than himself, and who conspicuously excluded him from their real conspiracies (a well attested fact). Even Casement argued to exclude Bigger from a Protestant Home Rule platform as a liability in the months immediately before the reports you quote. Sure, Bigger was warned that the peelers were coming to pick Denis McCullough up in a round up after 1916, but the warning that got Dinny out of bed at Ardrigh and away to Dublin originated from a friend of Bigger’s in the RIC…

Your ‘damning’ quotes seem to have come from a 1914 RIC report and an MI5 report quoted on pages 193-4 of Jeff Dudgeon’s book ‘Roger Casement—The Black Diaries.” Jeff himself identifies at least two whopping inaccuracies in the first report. He classes the first RIC compiler as “under-educated” and sums up the author of the second MI5 report as indulging himself as “amateur psychologist.” Strange to see documents prepared by ‘interested’ parties who do not appear to have known the subject of their reports at all well quoted as an accurate reflection Bigger’s political position.

The list of visitors to Ardrigh taken from the November 1914 report reflects only one facet of Bigger’s interests and gives a very distorted impression of the actual texture of his life at this time. I’m offering a snapshot of Bigger’s writing activities just two years later in that pivotal year, 1916, as a bit of a corrective. In the week that the Easter rising occurred Bigger’s article on “Francis Boyle—The Poet of Comber” was published in the Northern Whig. In succeeding months articles on archaeology, on the Brontes and on the church of St Tassach at Raholp appeared in other journals. The autumn publication of Bigger’s two small books on “The Magees—printers” and “Amyas Griffiths, surveyor of Belfast” was noted when they were reviewed in the press. Among the twenty articles Bigger wrote in 1916 the nearest he comes to anything approaching ‘politics (?)’ is a public talk on ‘Penal Days’ and should the GAA be considered as political, an article making “a plea for hurling.”

That Bigger’s Unionist friends “probably never knew the level of his commitment to revolutionary separatism” is a most bizarre comment. Belfast’s Unionist elite would have had to have been illiterate recluses to have avoided learning at least something of Bigger’s passions and enthusiasms from a wide variety of published media and Bigger himself would not have slow in telling them, but almost certainly out of Lodge. Bigger’s liberalism was nurtured by a life long career as a very active Freemason, (he ‘made’ the future Craigavon a mason in 1905) and many of his Unionist friends would have first met Bigger in a context where brotherhood and generosity of spirit should always hold sway over political acrimony.

Bigger wrote over 900 pieces which, if one takes the trouble to read even a fraction of them, reveal a passionate commitment to every aspect of local culture, ‘Ulster Scot’ just as much as ‘Nationalist,’ and an overwhelming quantity of the articles unsurprisingly fit into neither category, but reflect the broader history and traditions of the province. Together with the rich material preserved in the Bigger Archive they disclose the existence of a far more interesting man than the canonical Bigger of the sources most historians have employed. Usually these have been written from an entirely political perspective that does scant justice to their subject and all too often, Bigger is subsequently commented upon by those who only know of him at second hand from writings, where, since his death, he has been represented with sufficient venom to inspire the bizarrely misguided 1970 bombing of the Celtic cross that marked his grave. This malicious act of vandalism offers a final tragic irony for one who is still well remembered for the restoration of the graves of others and of many of the ancient high crosses of the north.

And, hey! Are we not supposed to be looking for Bigger’s ‘Owen Roe’ portrait from Castle Sean?

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1. *Framer (*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/frame/)*)*

[27 May 2012 at 8:38 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1084792)

Seaan says he sees “nothing that contradicts Bigger’s well attested liberalism” in his parading young Irish Volunteers along the Antrim Road in 1913. But that is not the issue, which misapprehension itself is quite revealing.

To mistake encouraging a display of militarism with liberalism says a lot where so much of Irish Republicanism is concerned. It is rarely analysed, and seldom criticised as similar Unionist or British actions would be. Compare the world view of the UVF and its gunrunning with the Irish Volunteers and their arms landing in the south. Then think what the Volunteers name in Irish was – Óglaigh na hÉireann – and you will realise both were aspects of the remilitarisation of Ireland. Yet one is usually handled romantically.

Nobody says Bigger wasn’t a liberal or immensely industrious in his researches and publications. He did many things that are exceptionally commendable, particularly as an early exponent for conserving our heritage and I think this is generally recognised. It was by QUB who awarded him an honorary degree in 1926. But that should not give him a bye where his polarising political actions are concerned. He was not just a fellow traveller.

He wasn’t an enthusiast for the Easter Rising, nor indeed were his friends Roger Casement and Bulmer Hobson. But all were actively involved in laying its foundations, as were many graduates of the Bigger academy at Ardrigh. Re-enacting got real and, unwittingly or not, he had helped create the modern separate Irish state – and ensure partition.

A better comparison than Yeats, although cruel, might be that of Miss Jean Brodie who never understood the influence she had on young minds, albeit not necessarily sending them in the direction she assumed.

As to the portrait, I rather fear it may not have been authentic.

1. [*SeaanUiNeill*](http://www.ardrighbooks.com) *(*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/seaanuineill/)*)*

[28 May 2012 at 3:00 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1084881)

Framer, mo chara, bail ó Dhia ort, and thank you for finally recognizing at last something of the profound importance of Bigger’s role as a cultural creative.

As regards the authenticity of the portrait of Owen Roe, Bigger would probably have agreed with you. Bigger could see for himself that the painting seemed to represent someone garbed in early sixteenth century costume, and was only with difficulty dissuaded, I was told, from identifying it with my famous namesake, Seán Donnghaileach Ó Néill Mór, misnamed “Seán an Díomais.” However, this does not mean that the painting fails as an authentic seventeenth century painting of Own Roe. Other seventeenth century examples exist employing the drama of costume to make a cultural point, such as Wright’s 1680 portrait of “Sir Neil O’Neill as an Irish Chieftain.” Hiram has himself noted this in the work he has so far published in the most recent Dúiche Néill during his ongoing quest to locate this (possible) Owen Roe portrait.

Now, as I understand the issues your continuing beef, while you now admit Bigger was politically a liberal, a prolific writer and researcher, (please note that the point I was making was the actual nature of what Bigger was writing about in 1916, and what this says about his politics, do I have to spell everything out?), a conservationist and an honorary M.A., you still appear to feel that speaking Irish and dressing up in fancy dress at New Year’s eve were profoundly sinister activities. And that having strong feelings for anything at all, either expressed in Gaeilge or in the béarla, is somehow despicably “romantic.”

You say, “Compare the world view of the UVF and its gunrunning with the Irish Volunteers and their arms landing in the south. Then think what the Volunteers name in Irish was – Óglaigh na hÉireann – and you will realise both were aspects of the remilitarisation of Ireland. Yet one is usually handled romantically.”

In my experience, actually both the formation of the Ulster Volunteers and of the Irish Volunteers were “handled romantically” (as you understand the term) at the time and they continue to be ‘romanticized’ today. Only few months back I was at a launch for Philip Orr’s excellent “New Perspectives, 1911-1914” book at Ballymena and remember seeing two fellas authentically dressed as the 1914 UVF. So you do not appear to need to speak Gaeilge to have a “romantic” approach to these things. Which is great. Give me those who genuinely care about something every time, rather than the cold haters who are motivated by getting even. But is your complaint really that the world sees one organization as “romantic but right” and the other as “repulsive but wrong,” that Hillary Clinton wanted to kiss Marty McGuiness rather than Davie Trimble? Sorry (wall) flower!

I remember saying some postings back that “It is always dangerous to project the baggage separatism has acquired over a succeeding hundred years onto the convictions of figures from a very different past. It is, after all, another country, and they did things very differently…….” The ‘Óglaigh na hÉireann’ of 1914 were neither the Provos nor CIRA. They were an historical organization, the direct descendant of which is probably the Irish Defense Force. When a name becomes a cultural “remold” it no more reflects on the primary organization than the re-tread is the original tyre. The two cannot be treated in the same way without risking some danger.

You accuse Bigger of “laying the foundations of 1916.” Ho Humm… but just what ideas did he instil into his poor victims impressionable heads in reality? I think this requires another illustration. Speaking of the costumes created for the first of his piper bands in 1908 Bigger says,

“no two costumes are alike in colour. All the old Gaelic hues have been used, and they were of the most varied character in the heroic times, thus getting away completely from any modern sameness of military appearance, and by a very variety of colour and difference of tone arriving at the true Celtic spirit where unity of the whole was best seen in the variety of detail.”

And this is exactly how Bigger thought about the culture of Ulster, of Ireland, as something where the “true Celtic spirit” found expression as a generous, inclusivist and poly (not multi) cultural (for which see Michael Sandel’s work) blending of planter, and Gael, and just about anything else he could throw in, such as Maypoles. The contemporary “there can be only one” (remember the “Highlander” movies?) “final [political] solution” approach underlying virtually every shade of political opinion in our contemporary Ulster was something entirely alien to Bigger’s very Victorian liberalism. Sad that you seem unable to grasp this.

And, good grief, you really appear to have missed the complex irony underlying Muriel Spark’s “The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie.” Sandy is not simply the ‘good guy’ and Jean Brodie is not the ‘bad guy.’ Sandy is asserting her independence, smashing a chrysalis so that her own creative wings may spread. Even in destroying her teacher, however, Sandy is still reflecting Jean as she has understood her. The original ‘Jean Brodie’ was Christina Kay, a charismatic teacher from Spark’s own school years who, while she may have (in common with Winston Churchill) openly admired Benito Mussolini, while passing on to her charges a love of our collective European culture, would become seminal in inspiring Spark’s final choice of a literary career, a career at first punctuated by Spark’s war work as a political intelligence operative. Muriel Spark herself describes Jean Brodie as “opening up her girls’ lives, on heightening their awareness of themselves and their world, and on breaking free of restrictive, conventional ways of thinking, feeling, and being,” just as Frank Bigger inspired those girls such as Helen Waddell who sat by his big peat fire in Ardrigh’s first floor library. So perhaps the Jean Brodie/Bigger parallel is simply an unconscious commendation rather than a “cruel comparison.”

Slán go fóill, mo chara!

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1. *Framer (*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/frame/)*)*

[30 May 2012 at 3:21 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1085712)

Seaan – If you read back you will see I recognised Bigger’s great contribution to conservation etc in an early post but of course that is not where I am taking issue with you, and issue it remains. Bigger’s liberalism may be better described as traditionalism or even conservatism but I have no problem also describing him as a liberal although he was not a socialist.
It was his encouragement of militarism and separatism which in the event undid so much of his good work and for which he can properly be held responsible that I was addressing, as it is rarely mentioned.
I am afraid you cannot comprehend him as being culpable in this regard or even examine the point.
Look around Ireland in the decade after his parading of Volunteers in Belfast in 1913, with toy or real guns and, forgetting the human cost, see the destruction that was wrought in so many fine buildings, castles and houses that Bigger knew and visited.
My point about Jean Brodie stands in that teachers have influence, as do political teachers like Bigger. He ran a hands-on operation not just a tableau vivant. Around him and beside him and because of him a revolution was being plotted by those he taught and it was to be successful. His work on the 1798 centenary as one example was highly effective. Like Yeats he regretted what he may have done but I doubt his views changed as his anglophobia was so intense. I recall Herbert Hughes joined the army in the 1st World War so Sandy wasn’t such a bad example.

1. [*SeaanUiNeill*](http://www.ardrighbooks.com) *(*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/seaanuineill/)*)*

[31 May 2012 at 6:34 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1086356)

So Bigger is guilty of “Anglophobia, separatism, militarism and cultural vandalism” ? But before fingering Bigger for solitary interment at Long Kesh, please go back and interrogate your sources more closely. Certainly, Bigger was a separatist, but exactly what did his separatism involve? The Ireland Bigger personally advocated was very much a constitutional Home Rule affair, all rather like devolution, I’m afraid, which is why he was an unsound “pipe and banner maniac” as far as the real revolutionary separatists like Jack White were concerned. Really, Bigger’s separatism was just milk and water Gladstonian Liberalism, much in the tradition of Rev. James Brown Armour, but with a bit of colourful street theatre thrown in.

I’m afraid you may be mistaking the exaggerations of a bumptious lawyer making a public case for separatism for the more subtitle beliefs of a complex man. Perhaps significantly, Bigger’s own non-sectarian inclusivist concept of an ‘Irish Ireland’ when transmitted by way of James and Margaret Cousins (Sister Nivedita) provided a model for the polycultural India Mohandas Gandhi envisaged would grow out of his organized passive resistance. There is a considerable difference between energetically, but intelligently, opposing colonialisation and actually hating an entire people. Gandhi himself shows this. But, as one serious and profoundly knowledgeable long term student of Bigger has said to me in the past, Bigger’s politics are far and away the least interesting thing about the man.

Now, you cannot be suggesting seriously that Bigger’s lifelong crusade for local conservation led to the wanton destruction of fine buildings, castles and houses? Surely such destruction actually began with the English Government’s 1903 Wyndham act which finally removed the economic basis on which Castle and big house could be maintained? Even the boys you’re thinking off with the petrol cans who just completed the process were hardly amongst those who regularly visited at Ardrigh, where they? While I really hate to play the numbers game it must be said that dramatically more destruction of the natural environment and of our architectural heritage is due to the orgy of development in town and country since the Good Friday agreement than in all through the period since 1916-1996. The quirky “Linenopolis” Belfast Bigger knew, built mostly in an ornate Italian Renaissance style since the 1870s has given way to an international terminal crop “Cosmopolis” of short life span steel frame buildings whose piles have finally obliterated an underlying street plan laid down at the time of the plantation that had even survived Belfast’s mini-blitz in 1941! But even the later bombing campaign that cleared the way for all this new development can hardly be considered the product of Bigger’s baleful influence by any reasonable person.

This issue of Bigger’s influence needs a lot more careful thought. It’s not really acceptable to maintain that because some of Bigger’s friends were physical force men, ergo, everything done by and around them was initiated through Bigger’s influence. As you quite rightly said yourself commenting elsewhere on the Dunmanway assassinations “The past should be interpreted in its own terms. People should be innocent until proven guilty, not the other way round.” But then Bigger would not be the first person to be damned for corrupting youth. In 1889 a book appeared by a philosopher who would prove to be the most seductive champion of the twentieth century’s cult of violence. Georges Sorel’s “Procès de Socrate” suggested that Socrates’ trial and condemnation were very proper decisions on the part of the guardians of Athens to destroy a dangerous corrupter of youth who persuaded his acolytes think for themselves and challenge the equilibrium of the society into which they had been born.

Just one last thing, Herby Hughes was hardly ‘Sandy’ in revolt against a sinister mentor when he took the King’s shilling. He was not the only Irish speaking Ardrigh boy in the Swabian redoubt and at Wytschaete. Characteristically, Bigger defied conventional expectations by actively encouraging younger friends to join up. As a staunch National Party supporter he followed the example of John Redmond by enthusiastically supporting the British war effort. But such enlistments, in common with the decision of others to join Óglaigh na hÉireann, appear to me to have been a matter of personal choice by the individuals involved.

[*SeaanUiNeill*](http://www.ardrighbooks.com) *(*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/seaanuineill/)*)*

[1 June 2012 at 5:38 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1086766)

The real proof of Bigger’s moderation, it seems, is the contempt or rage he inspires on both poles of the political divide in Ulster. I find Republicans often ask me “Where was Bigger in 1916?” (writing non-political cultural articles, alas!) They are just as strongly critical of Bigger’s failure to live up to the requirements of their political position as Framer is, but in a diametrically opposed way.

 *Framer (*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/frame/)*)*

[22 June 2012 at 9:41 am](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1095159)

“As a staunch National Party supporter he followed the example of John Redmond by enthusiastically supporting the British war effort.”

Not aware of this at all. Can you quote any chapter or verse or provide references on such Bigger enthusiasm?

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 [*SeaanUiNeill*](http://www.ardrighbooks.com) *(*[*profile*](http://sluggerotoole.com/profile/seaanuineill/)*)*

[8 July 2012 at 1:20 pm](http://sluggerotoole.com/2012/05/18/lost-and-found-in-search-of-owen-roe-oneill/comment-page-1/#comment-1099567)

Not all of us, alas, rely entirely on printed matter for our knowledge of FJB. And, with an Anthropologist in the family I feel more able to use material of oral provenance and discover I have much less of a fetish for the printed page. You should be wary of print yourself after missing the significant qualifying features of the RIC special branch and MI5 reports. But perhaps if you’d gone to the Public Record Office for the originals or Queens for the microfilm copy, rather than just flicking casually through Jeff Dudgeon’s book, you’d have noticed that FJB does not appear to have even merited his very own RIC/MI5 personal file as a “dangerous subversive.”

Well, here goes. My grandfather, for a start, was encouraged to join up in 1914 by your ebullient separatist, who felt that both volunteer bodies, under the stress of a common enemy, would in time come to understand their distinct Irishness. As I’ve said before, the past is a very different country……

I remember other WW1 survivors from my childhood who also cited FJB as the man who encouraged them to join up. You’ll forgive me, perhaps, for not mentioning their family names on the thread. I remember hearing, too, that not a battalion of the Ulster Division was without a decent compliment of Irish speakers.

But I will check out the Bigger archive some day and get back to you if I find anything useful. After all, it’s exactly the sort of material that Frederic Charles Bigger would have been very keen to keep, if only to preserve the memory of his brother’s contrariness.

Slán go fóill, mo chara!

**[Never heard any more about Bigger acting as a recruiter for the British Army from Roland Spottiswoode?? so still seriously doubt this. It doesn’t ring true while oral history is notoriously inaccurate.]**