

Whitton, Eleanor Constance

by Gerry McElroy

Whitton, Eleanor Constance (1879–1956), campaigner for animal welfare, was born in Co. Longford, the daughter of the Rev. Alexander Beatty, Church of Ireland minister. She appears to have been educated locally. In 1902 she married Henry M. Whitton, registrar of the court of appeal; they had two daughters and a son. An accomplished horsewoman, she helped to establish the South County Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in 1905, and served as the society's honorary secretary until 1954. In 1928 she took the lead in the campaign against the export of horses for slaughter by helping to establish the Irish branch of the International League for the Protection of Horses (ILPH), serving as its honorary director for the rest of her life. Described by an associate at the ILPH as 'almost a one-woman show', she undertook investigations into the conditions under which horses were shipped for export and helped to launch a vigorous campaign to induce the government to ban the export of live horses. It has been estimated that she personally bought between 4,000 and 9,000 horses to save them from a cruel fate, and she also helped to buy 'rest fields' for them at Rathfarnham, Co. Dublin, the first of their kind in Ireland.

When large-scale exports of horses from Ireland began after the end of the Second World War, she spent considerable time at Dublin docks watching the loading of live animals for export, especially to France and Belgium (where many doctors prescribed horse-flesh for their patients, in the belief that it was free of tuberculosis). She ensured that the horses were fit to travel and that their conditions on board were good, going so far as to employ a veterinary surgeon to travel on one of the ships to France. In addition, she travelled throughout Ireland to inspect horses in her dual capacity as honorary director of the ILPH (Irish branch) and the SPCA. These activities gained most prominence in early 1952 when the International League for the Protection of Horses, the Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Our Dumb Friends' League and the Dublin Animals' Protection Association organised a 1,000-strong protest march through central Dublin on 28 March 1952 and held a well-attended meeting at the Mansion House, Dublin, on 28 April 1952. Their common programme of action was called the 'five Ps': parades, posters, protest meetings, publicity and politics. Support for the campaign was underlined by a number of letters to the *Irish Times* in February and March 1952, and it was later given international publicity when Patrick Keatley wrote a series of articles on the subject for the *Manchester Guardian* in June 1952. While the campaign to end the export of live horses failed during her lifetime, her work later bore fruit when the ILPH and the SPCA achieved many of their aims in legislation passed in 1961, 1963 and 1964. Moreover, her work succeeded in stimulating debate in the dáil in 1948–52 and the campaign secured the support of a number of TDs during this period, including Henry Dockrell, Patrick Cogan (qv), William Davin (qv), William Norton

(qv), Patrick O'Donnell, Michael Ffrench-O'Carroll, Alfred Patrick Byrne (qv), and taoiseach (1948–51) John A. Costello (qv).

Whitton was a pioneer in the area of animal welfare and was partly responsible for making it an important aspect of Irish public policy rather than just a concern of a social elite. Her principal residences were in Co. Longford; Drummartin Lodge, Dundrum, Co. Dublin; Belmont Terrace, Stillorgan, Co. Dublin; and Laburnum Road, Clonskeagh, Dublin. Her son, Cuthbert Henry Whitton, was appointed prime judge in the supreme court of Singapore in 1954. She died 28 March 1956 at home at 10 Laburnum Road, Clonskeagh, Dublin.

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*Thom IWW*, 260; *Dáil debates*, 17, 26 Apr. 1951, 14, 20 Feb., 4, 26 June 1952; *Ir. Times*, 12, 15 Feb. 1952, 29 Mar. 1956; *Ir. Independent*, 29 Mar., 29 Apr. 1952; *Manchester Guardian*, 9, 13 June 1952, 29 Mar. 1956 (obituary); *Times*, 29 Mar. 1956; *Who's Who* (1990), 1939; Jeremy James, *Debt of honour: the story of the International League for the Protection of Horses* (1994), 96–7