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Force of LAW for good: Limerick woman Marion Fitzgibbon's work for animals chronicled

by Maria Flannery 11 Oct 2017

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Marion Fitzgibbon at a protest against the export of greyhounds to China a number of years ago. The Limerick woman has spent decades working for animal welfare

THE year is 1993, and Limerick woman Marion Fitzgibbon is on the phone in the corridor of the hospital, receiving a call that would change her life.

ISPCA chairwoman Marion Webb is telling her vice-chair Fitzgibbon – suffering from cancer at the time – that she is moving to Scotland. “It’s your time,” Webb tells her, “and you’re going to get well.”

A few days after their phone call, Webb arrives at the hospital with folders; fundraising, budgets, financial projections, legislation... and one for “the greyhound situation”.

This was not the beginning of the Limerick woman’s work in the area, but it proved to be a life-changing moment.

Marion Fitzgibbon is known all over Ireland for her unfaltering dedication to helping animals. Now *doing Trojan work at the helm of Limerick Animal Welfare* ([news/home/226326/limerick-charity-boss-vows-to-go-to-jail-before-paying-rates-bill-of-40k.html](https://www.limerickleader.com/news/home/226326/limerick-charity-boss-vows-to-go-to-jail-before-paying-rates-bill-of-40k.html)) (LAW), much of her story is told in a new book by American author Laura Schenone.

The Dogs of Avalon traces the history behind a small international network of passionate animal activists, as they “fight for justice” for dogs and all animals.

Schenone recounts several local stories of animal injustices, including the meeting of Marion and Stafford Taylor, the Castlemahon man who kept tigers, baboons, and a Canadian black bear in the early 1990s.

Marion, as chairwoman of the ISPCA, remembers knocking on the door of Taylor's house and walking through to the exotic animals in the garden. She was soon driving back from the nearest meat factory with her car full of enough meat to last a week, after an impassioned plea for the tigers – one of which she described as being “thin as a rasher”.

When she tried to feed the former circus bear – a vegetarian – while humming a tune, the extremely timid animal raised her paws and danced in circles as she had been trained to do in a previous life, before retreating shyly to the corner.

The ISPCA had never before taken on the cause of wild or exotic animals. Nevertheless, under Fitzgibbon's leadership, so began the process of trying to find new homes for the animals.

The book tells the story that many people in Limerick, and indeed Ireland, will remember from the news of the time. Stafford Taylor, himself an animal lover who had probably saved the tigers from death at the end of their circus careers, cooperated with the ISPCA when accused of abuse, due to the condition and unsuitability of the homemade facilities for the majestic animals.

But some of *Marion's most fervent work has been done in the rescue of greyhounds* ([news/news/109477/Rescued-Limerick-greyhounds-living-la.html](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/news/109477/Rescued-Limerick-greyhounds-living-la.html)), who often face death at the age of three or four, as soon as their racing careers are over. She helped in the foundation of Avalon, the greyhound sanctuary in Galway after which the book is named.



Ireland produces too many greyhounds for the local racing industry, and over the years, many have been exported to China, where they face cruel conditions and are often killed if they under perform. Even in Ireland, greyhounds are regularly poorly treated, abandoned or killed if they do not perform a specific function within the industry.

One of Marion's more recent international rehoming projects saw her send three greyhounds and two lurchers to Italy in 2012.

Marion told the Limerick Leader at the time that she was contacted by Italian welfare group SOS Levrieri through UK Greyhound Compassion.

Some of them were malnourished, and had urine scalds on their feet due to poor kennelling conditions, before they were rehomed with affluent Italian owners.

The five dogs were given a ceremony, attended by a former government minister, on their arrival in Brianza, near Milan. The story made several Italian national newspapers and TV stations at the time.

New Jersey-based author Laura Schenone's interest in the topic was sparked when she rescued a dog called Lily from Ireland, a rescue orchestrated by Marion – a testament to the far-reaching work of the animal worker, who Schenone describes in *The Dogs of Avalon* as a 'miracle worker'.

"I was blown away by her because she spoke about animals as if they were as important as people," Schenone has said.

The story of Fitzgibbon's crusade to rescue animals living in cruelty has been described as a 'moving' chronicle. *The Dogs of Avalon* is out now, in O'Mahony's and all well-stocked bookshops.