

An Litir Bheag le Ruairidh MacIlleathain

An Litir Bheag is a shortened and simplified version of Ruairidh's Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh (also available on the BBC website), designed for those who are at an earlier stage of learning Gaelic. The topic each week is the same as Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh so that, once the Litir Bheag is mastered, a student of the language might wish to try the full Litir. This is Litir Bheag 223 (which corresponds to Litir 527). Ruairidh can be contacted at roddy.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

Last week, I was looking at old maps. Old Maps of Scotland. It was the Dutchman Joan Blaeu that made the maps. That was in the Seventeenth Century. He based the maps to a large extent on the work another man did. He was the Scot, Timothy Pont.

Along with the maps were short written accounts. I want to tell you what Blaeu wrote about two places in the Gàidhealtachd. They are Harris and Barra.

About Harris, he wrote, "there is excellent pasture for sheep, principally a very high hill entirely covered with grass from top to bottom. Donald Munro [Dean of the Isles], a saintly man of great erudition, says that when he was in these islands, he saw wandering sheep of great age that belonged to no one. The number of sheep is constantly increasing here because there are no wolves, foxes or snakes." Well, what's your opinion? Is that like Harris?!

And, regarding Barra, you'll know that there is a large beach there called the "large beach". People still dig up cockles from that

An t-seachdain sa chaidh, bha mi a' toirt sùil air seann mhapaichean. Seann mhapaichean na h-Alba. 'S e an Duitseach Joan Blaeu a rinn na mapaichean. Bha sin anns an t-seachdamh linn deug. Stèidhich e na mapaichean gu mòr air an obair a rinn fear eile. B' esan an t-Albannach Timothy Pont.

An cois nam mapaichean bha pìosan beaga sgrìobhaidh. Tha mi airson innse dhuibh dè sgrìobh Blaeu mu dheidhinn dà àite air a' Ghàidhealtachd. Is iad sin Na Hearadh agus Barraigh.

Mu Na Hearadh, sgrìobh e: "...tha ionaltradh math ann do chaoraich, gu sònraichte beinn àrd a tha còmhdhaichte gu lèir le feur bho a bonn gu a mullach. Tha Dòmhnall Rothach, fear naomh air leth ionnsaichte, ag ràdh nuair a bha e anns na h-eileanan seo, gum faca e seann chaoraich air seachran, agus iad gun a bhith le duine sam bith. Tha àireamh nan caorach a' dol am meud fad na h-ùine a chionn 's nach eil madaidhean-allaidh, madaidhean-ruadha no nathr-aichean ann." Uill, dè ur beachd fhèin? A bheil sin coltach ris Na Hearadh?!

Agus a thaobh Bharraigh, bidh fios agaibh gu bheil tràigh mhòr ann, air a bheil An Tràigh Mhòr(!) Bidh daoine

beach. “On the north coast of Barra,” Blaeu wrote, “rises a hill, green from top to bottom, on the summit of which is a freshwater spring; this forms a stream flowing down into the sea that carries in its waters innumerable shapeless little creatures that strongly resemble our snails. Locals call the part of the shore where the stream reaches the sea ‘the wide sands’ because a broad stretch of sand is exposed when the tide is out. Here quantities of shellfish are dug up, supposedly those grown from the creatures carried down by [in] the stream, which have grown to maturity in the sea.”

Well, there you have it. Is that the true life history of the cockle[s]? Our ancestors were wise in many ways. But I reckon they got that one a bit wrong!

fhathast a’ buain shrùban air an tràigh sin. “Air costa tuath Bharraigh,” sgrìobh Blaeu, “tha cnoc ag èiridh, a tha gorm bho a mhullach gu a bhonn, agus fuaran fìor-uisge air a mhullach. Tha seo a’ dèanamh allt a tha a’ ruith chun na mara, agus e a’ giùlain na uisgeachan an t-uabhas de chreutairean beaga gun chumadh a tha gu math coltach ris na seilcheagan againne. Tha muinntir an àite a’ cur ‘the wide sands’ air a’ phàirt dhen chladach far a bheil an t-allt a’ ruigsinn na mara oir tha tràigh mhòr ghainmhich ann ... An seo bithear a’ cladhach maorach, a thathar a’ dèanamh dheth a dh’fhàs bho na creutairean a chaidh a ghiùlain sìos anns an allt, a thàinig gu ìre anns a’ mhuir.”

Uill, sin agaibh e. An e sin fìor eachdraidh-beatha nan srùban?! Bha ar sinnsirean gu math glic ann an iomadach dòigh. Ach saoilidh mi gun d’fhuair iad sin rudeigin ceàrr!