

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 274 (which corresponds to Litir 578). Ruairidh can be contacted at roddy.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

The plant Rumex acetosa is called samh in Gaelic. People call it common sorrel in English. The English name came from the taste of the leaf. It's sour. In Scots its name is sourock.

It's not too clear where the Gaelic name came from. Does the plant have a strong smell? I mean – does it have a bad smell? I don't think so. It must be that samh means something else.

Now, the word samh has many meanings in Dwelly's dictionary. For example, clownish or rustic person, savage, flock, herd, giant, a god, the sun, the sea. But none of those explain why Rumex acetosa would be called samh. And Alexander MacBain in his dictionary – Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language – does not explain the origin of the word.

Thus, here is my own wee idea. Perhaps it originally comes from Polish. Why not [wouldn't it]? We talk about vodka, don't we?

In the old days, people in Scotland were eating sorrel leaves.

'S e samh a' Ghàidhlig air an lus Rumex acetosa. Canaidh daoine common sorrel ris ann am Beurla. Samh ann an Gàidhlig. Thàinig an t-ainm Beurla bho bhlas na duilleig. Tha e searbh no sour. Ann an Albais, 's e sourock an t-ainm a tha air.

Chan eil e cho soilleir cò às a thàinig an t-ainm Gàidhlig. A bheil samh làidir air an lus? Tha mi a' ciallachadh – a bheil droch fhàileadh air? Cha chreid mi gu bheil. Feumaidh gu bheil samh a' ciallachadh rudeigin eile.

Nise, tha iomadh ciall air an fhacal samh ann am faclair Dwelly. Mar eisimpleir, clownish or rustic person, savage, flock, herd, giant, a god, the sun, the sea. Ach chan eil gin dhiubh sin a' mìneachadh carson a bhiodh samh air Rumex acetosa. Agus chan eil Alasdair MacBheathain anns an fhaclair aige – Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language – a' mìneachadh tùs an fhacail.

Mar sin, seo smuain bheag agam fhìn. 'S dòcha gu bheil e a' tighinn bho thùs bho Phòlainnis. Carson nach bitheadh? Bidh sinn a' bruidhinn air bhodca, nach bi?

Anns an t-seann aimsir bha daoine ann an Alba ag ithe duilleagan an

They were a vegetable. In Eastern Europe people still do that. In Polish the plant's name is szczaw ("shrtav"). The Jews in Eastern Europe were also eating it a lot. They picked up the word from Polish. In Yiddish, the language of the Jews, the plant's name is shtsav.

English-speaking people adopted the Yiddish name, modifying it to schav. Schav today doesn't mean the plant itself, but a soup. But sorrel is the main ingredient of the soup. It's a cold soup. There is sorrel in it, and onions, lemon juice, eggs, sugar and sour cream.

I reckon the word schav at one time was meaning the plant itself. The Gaels picked up schav from English-speakers. They modified it to samh. Now, I don't have proof that that was the route that samh took into Gaelic. But do you have a better thought?

t-saimh. Bha iad mar ghlasraich. Ann an taobh sear na Roinn Eòrpa bidh daoine ri sin fhathast. Ann am Pòlainnis 's e *szczaw* ("shrtav") ainm an luis. Bha na h-Iùdhaich ann an taobh sear na Roinn Eòrpa ga ithe gu mòr cuideachd. Thog iadsan am facal à Pòlainnis. Ann an Iuidis, cànan nan Iùdhach, 's e *shtshav* an t-ainm air an lus.

Thog luchd na Beurla an t-ainm Iuidis, ga atharrachadh gu *schav*. Chan eil *schav* an-diugh a' ciallachadh an luis fhèin, ach brot. Ach 's e samh an rud as motha sa bhrot. 'S e brot fuar a tha ann. Tha samh ann, agus uinneanan, sùgh liomaid, uighean, siùcar agus uachdar goirt.

Tha mi an dùil gun robh am facal *schav* uaireigin a' ciallachadh an luis fhèin. Thog na Gàidheil *schav* bho luchd na Beurla. Dh'atharraich iad e *samh*. Nise, chan eil dearbhadh agam gur e sin an rathad a thug *samh* a-steach don Ghàidhlig. Ach a bheil smuain nas fheàrr agaibh fhèin?