

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 310 (which corresponds to Litir 614). Ruairidh can be contacted at roddy.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

Here is a bit of a song. The song is old. It's from the parish of Lochcarron in Wester Ross. We got down from Fraser's Àird (near Beauly), a black hornless cow with half an udder, Many a man came with money, To get a drop of her milk.

Does bò mean "cow"? And does bainne mean "milk"? Well, no. Here is the third verse of the song. That's where the strange cow was, She always has a bellyfull in her, Many's a time I took my fill of her, The best barley juice in the world.

Aha! The best barley juice in the world. What is barley juice? What, other than whisky! The black, hornless cow is the illegal still ["black pot"]. That is the equipment the old people had in order to make whisky. "Milk" meant "whisky"!

The name of the song is The Song of the Secret Still. It was collected by Arthur Geddes from Finlay Murchison at the head of Loch Carron. I haven't found out where the secret still was. But the chorus names "brown-haired man of the pass". Who was the brown-haired man? Well, I'm not sure. Perhaps the landlord or tacksman. It

Seo criomag de dh'òran. Tha an t-òran sean. Tha e à sgìre Loch Carrann ann an Ros an Iar. Fhuair sinn nuas bho Àrd Mhic Shimidh, Bò mhaol dhubh 's i air leth-shine, 'S iomadh fear a thig le sgilig, Dh'iarraidh dileag de 'cuid bainne.

A bheil bò a' ciallachadh "bò"? Agus a bheil bainne a' ciallachadh "bainne"? Uill, chan eil. Seo an treas rann dhen òran: Siud far an robh a' bhò bha neònach, Bidh luchd mionaich innte an-còmhnaidh, 'S tric a thug mi fhèin mo leòr dhith, Sùgh an eòrn' as fheàrr san talamh.

Aha! Sùgh an eòrn' as fheàrr san talamh. Dè tha ann an sùgh an eòrna? Dè ach uisge-beatha! 'S e a' bho mhaol dhubh a' phoit dhubh. 'S e sin an uidheamachd a bha aig na seann daoine airson uisge-beatha a dhèan-amh. Bha "bainne" a' ciallachadh "uisge-beatha"!

'S e ainm an òrain – Òran na Poite Duibhe. Chaidh a chruinneachadh le Arthur Geddes bho Fhionnladh MacCalmain aig ceann Loch Carrann. Cha d' fhuair mi a-mach càite an robh a' phoit dhubh. Ach tha an t-sèist ag ainmeachadh "fear donn a' bhealaich". Cò bha anns an fhear dhonn? Uill, chan eil mi cinnteach. 'S dòcha an t-uachdaran no fear-taca. A rèir choltais

appears he was supportive of the whisky makers. Here is the chorus: Hùg o air the brown-haired man of the pass, Contented, cheerful, manly young man, Hùg o air the brown-haired man of the pass.

The whisky makers were afraid that the gaugers [excisemen] were going to come. The affair was illegal. That fear comes to the surface in the fourth verse: When we began to put her under [hide the equipment], The black cow and her young calf [the vessel for collecting the distillate], And us afraid the heroes [gaugers] would come, And that they'll leave us without cow or milk. Oh dear – without cow or milk. A terrible thing!

The song praises the secret still. But the author appreciates that strong drink also causes harm. Drink is like the sun. Perhaps a little of it [her] is good for you. But you can't put up with [suffer] too much.

bha e taiceil do luchd-dèanaimh an uisge-bheatha. Seo an t-sèist: *Hùg o air fear donn a' bhealaich, Óigear sunndach, sùrdach, fearail, Hùg o air fear donn a' bhealaich.*

Bha an t-eagal air luchd-dèanaimh an uisge-bheatha gun robh na gèidsearan a' dol a thighinn. Bha an gnothach mì-laghail. Tha an t-eagal sin a' tighinn am bàrr anns a' cheathramh rann: *Nuair a theann sinn air cur foidhpe, Bha a' bhò dhubh agus laogh òg aic', 'S eagal oirnn gun tig na seòid, 'S gum fàg iad sinn gun bhò 's gun bhainne. Obh obh – gun bhò 's gun bhainne. Rud uabhasach!*

Tha an t-òran a' moladh na poite duibhe. Ach bha an t-ùghdar mothachail gum bi deoch làidir a' dèanamh cron cuideachd. Tha an deoch coltach ris a' ghrèin. 'S dòcha gum bi beagan dhith math dhut. Ach chan fhulaing thu cus.