

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 387 (which corresponds to Litir 691). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

I was telling you about Keith Norman MacDonald. He published the book Puirt-a-Beul: or Songs for Dancing as Practised from a Remote Antiquity by the Highlanders of Scotland in 1901.

Was Keith Norman correct? Are puirt-à-beul very old? It's difficult to be certain. We'll look at that question later.

Brochan lom, tana, lom, brochan, lom sùghain... Do you know that song? It's in Keith Norman MacDonald's collection. I was speaking to a guy last year. He said that he knew [had] one Gaelic song from his childhood. But he didn't know what the words meant. And he sang Brochan Lom. "It means," I said to him, "bare, thin, bare gruel, bare sowans gruel." "Aha," ars' esan, "it's a song of great philosophical depth, then!"

That's how many puirt-à-beul are. They're not concerned with big subjects. But the rhythms in them are important. They make mention of things that were part of the life of the Gaels – love, hunting, the shieling, emigration, heroism, nature and so on. Those songs are among the most special [unique] things in the Gaelic

Bha mi ag innse dhuibh mu Chè Tormod Dòmhnallach. Dh'fhoillsich e an leabhar *Puirt-a-Beul: or Songs for Dancing as Practised from a Remote Antiquity by the Highlanders of Scotland* ann an naoi ceud deug 's a h-aon (1901).

An robh Cè Tormod ceart? A bheil puirt-à-beul uabhasach sean? Tha e doirbh a bhith cinnteach. Bheir sinn sùil air a' cheist sin fhathast.

Brochan lom, tana, lom, brochan, lom sùghain... A bheil sibh eòlach air an òran sin? Tha e anns a' chruinneachadh aig Cè Tormod Dòmhnallach. Bha mi a' bruidhinn ri fear an-uiridh. Thuir e gun robh aon òran Gàidhlig aige bho òige. Ach cha robh fios aige dè bha na faclan a' ciallachadh. Agus ghabh e Brochan Lom. "It means," thuir mise ris, "bare, thin, bare gruel, bare sowans gruel." "Aha," ars' esan, "it's a song of great philosophical depth, then!"

Sin mar a tha mòran de phuirt-à-beul. Chan eil iad a-mach air cuspairean mòra. Ach tha an ruitheam annta cudromach. Tha iad a' dèanamh iomradh air rudan a bha mar phàirt de bheatha nan Gàidheal – gaol, sealg, an àirigh, eilthireachd, gaisgeachd, nàdar is mar sin air adhart. Tha na h-òrain sin am measg nan rudan as àraidhe ann an saoghal na

world.

A new edition of Keith Norman's book came out this year. It was published by Taigh na Teud on Skye. The editor was William Lamb. Lamb wrote an interesting essay. It was about puirt-à-beul – when and why did this singing style come into being?

Up until the end of the sixteenth century, the word port meant “a tune for the harp”. But the playing of the harp diminished. Then port was meaning “a dance tune”. It was played on an instrument or sung with the voice.

Two ideas have been extant about the origins of puirt-à-beul. The first one is that it arose because of the Act of Proscription after the Battle of Culloden. The second is that it arose along with an awakening [rise in evangelism] in the Church in the 19th Century. We'll look at those next week.

Gàidhlig.

Thàinig eagan ùr a-mach dhen leabhar aig Cè Tormod am-bliadhna. Chaidh fhoillseachadh le Taigh na Teud anns an Eilean Sgitheanach. B' e Uilleam Lamb an deasaiche. Sgrìobh Lamb aisteinntinneach. Bha i mu phuirt-à-beul – cuin agus carson a dh'èirich an stoidhle seinn seo?

Gu deireadh an t-siathamh linn deug, bha am facal *port* a' ciallachadh “fonn airson na clàrsaich”. Ach chrion cluich na clàrsaich. An uair sin bha *port* a' ciallachadh “fonn-dannsaidh”. Bha e air a chluich air ionnsramaid no air a sheinn leis a' ghuth.

Tha dà bheachd-smuain air a bhith ann a thaobh tùs phort-à-beul. 'S e a' chiad tè gun do dh'èirich e air sgàth Achd an Toirmisg às dèidh Blàr Chùil Lodair. 'S e an dàrna tè gun do dh'èirich e an cois dùsgadh anns an Eaglais anns an naoidheamh linn deug. Bheir sinn sùil orra sin an-ath-sheachdain.