

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 533 (which corresponds to Litir 837). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

Have you heard of the Gaelic poet, James MacIntyre? I'm pondering on this man because I was speaking about Samuel Johnson last week.

I'll come to James MacIntyre of Glen Noe shortly. To begin with, I'm going to say something about arboreal imagery in Gaelic poetry. The old Gaels were assessing the trees, as it were, to be in two groups – blessed ones and cursed ones. And they were describing people according to that imagery.

In 'Alasdair from Glengarry' Sileas na Ceapaich praises Alasdair, following his death. Here she is, employing arboreal imagery:

You were the yew in the forest,
You were the strong, steadfast oak,
You were the holly and blackthorn,
You were the apple-tree, rough-barked, covered with blooms;
You had no kinship with the

An cuala sibh mun bhàrd Ghàidhlig, Seumas Mac an t-Saoir? Tha mi a' meòrachadh air an duine seo air sgàth 's gun robh mi a' bruidhinn mu dheidhinn Shomhairle MhicIain an t-seachdain sa chaidh.

Thig mi gu Seumas Mac an t-Saoir à Gleann Nodha an ceartuair. An toiseach, tha mi a' dol a ràdh rudeigin mu ìomhaigheachd nan craobh ann am bàrdachd Ghàidhlig. Bha na seann Ghàidheil a' tomhas nan craobh mar gum biodh ann an dà bhuidhinn – feadhainn bheannaichte agus feadhainn mhallaichte. Agus bha iad a' dèanamh tuairisgeul de dhaoine a rèir na h-ìomhaigheachd sin.

Ann an 'Alasdair à Gleanna Garadh' tha Sileas na Ceapaich a' moladh Alasdair, an dèidh a bhàis. Seo i a' cur ìomhaigheachd nan craobh an sàs:

Bu tu 'n t-iubhar anns a' choillidh

Bu tu 'n darach daingeann làidir,

Bu tu 'n cuileann, bu tu 'n droighinn,

Bu tu 'n t-abhall molach blàthmhor;

Cha robh do dhàimh ris a'

aspen,
Nor bonds with the alder;
You had nothing of the lime-
tree in you,
You were the darling of the
beautiful women.

The blessed trees were the yew, the oak, the holly, the blackthorn and the apple [and its more modern name]. The cursed trees were the aspen, the alder and the elm (lime).

Dr Johnson came to the Highlands. He published a bad opinion of Gaelic. James MacIntyre was horrified. And he himself wrote a venomous poem, criticizing Johnson. Here is James employing arboreal imagery:

You'd not be the blackthorn or
the holly,
Or the tough enduring yew,
There's not a bit in you of the
oak
Or the red willow of the plains;
Most of you is aspen

With hawthorn nails and alder
hands –
Your whole head is made of
elm,
Especially your tongue and
gums.

His blessed trees were the blackthorn, the holly, the yew and the oak – four of the five that Sìleas had. And the cursed ones – the aspen, the alder and the elm – the three that Sìleas had. And hawthorn and red willow also. Unique imagery of trees of the Gàidhealtachd.

*chritheann
No do dhligheadh ris an fheàrna;
Cha robh bheag annad dhen
leamhan;
Bu tu leannan nam ban àlainn.*

B' iad na craobhan beannaichte an t-iubhar, an darach, an cuileann, an droigheann agus an t-abhall no craobh-ubhail. B' iad na craobhan mallaichte an critheann, an fheàrna agus an leamhan.

Thàinig an t-Oll. MacIain chun na Gàidhealtachd. Dh'fhoillsich e droch bheachd air a' Ghàidhlig. Bha Seumas Mac an t-Saoir air a mhaslachadh. Agus sgrìobh e fhèin dàn nimheil, a' càineadh MhicIain. Seo agaibh Seumas a' cleachdadh ìomhaigheachd nan craobh:

*Cha bu tu 'n droigheann no 'n
cuileann
No an t-iubhar fulannach làidir,
Chan eil mìr annad dhen darach*

*No de sheileach dearg nam blàran;
Tha 'chuid as motha dhìot de
chritheann,
Ìnean sgithich 's làmhan feàrna –*

Tha do cheann gu lèir de leamhan,

*Gu h-àraidh do theanga 's do
chàirein.*

B' iad na craobhan beannaichte aige – an droigheann, an cuileann, an t-iubhar agus an darach – ceithir de na còig a bha aig Sìleas. Agus an fheadhainn mhallaichte – an critheann, an fheàrna agus an leamhan – na trì a bha aig Sìleas. Agus an sgitheach is seileach dearg a bharrachd. Ìomhaigheachd àraidh de chraobhan na Gàidhealtachd.