

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 534 (which corresponds to Litir 838). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

Do you remember the words of James MacIntyre last week? They were about Samuel Johnson. It wasn't praising that the poet was doing:

Most of you is made of aspen, hawthorn nails and alder hands...

MacIntyre was connecting Johnson to cursed trees. But why was the alder among those trees?

Well, I'm not entirely sure. If the alder tree is named in the Bible, I don't know of it. I reckon that the alder tree's bad reputation goes back to pre-Christian times. Perhaps it was linked to the sap of the alder because it's like blood when it leaks out.

And two things about the alder that marks it as different from other trees. When a log of alder is split, it is put upside down. We say – every wood from the top and the alder from the bottom.

Logs of this tree last longer in water than they do when they are dry. Because of that, it is the alder tree that was often used for

A bheil cuimhne agaibh air na briathran aig Seumas Mac an t-Saoir an t-seachdain sa chaidh? Bha iad mu dheidhinn Shomhairle MhicIain. Cha b' e moladh a bha am bàrd a' dèanamh:

Tha 'chuid as motha dhìot de chritheann, inean sgithich 's làmhan feàrna...

Bha Mac an t-Saoir a' ceangal MhicIain ri craobhan mallaichte. Ach carson a bha an fheàrna am measg nan craobh sin?

Uill, chan eil mi buileach cinnteach. Ma tha a' chraobh-fheàrna air a h-ainmeachadh anns a' Bhioball, chan aithne dhomh e. Saoilidh mi gu bheil droch-chliù na craoibh-fheàrna a' dol air ais don linn ro-Chriosdail. 'S dòcha gun robh e ceangailte ri snodhach na feàrna oir tha e coltach ri fuil nuair a tha e ag aoidion a-mach.

Agus tha dà rud mun fheàrna a tha ga comharrachadh mar eadar-dhealaichte bho chraobhan eile. Nuair a thathar a' sgoltadh loga de dh'fheàrna, bithear ga chur bun-os-cionn. Canaidh sinn – gach fiodh bhon bhàrr ach an fheàrn bhon bhun.

Bidh logaichean dhen chraoibh seo a' maireachdainn nas fhaide ann an uisge na tha iad nuair a tha iad tioram. Air sàillibh sin, 's e a' chraobh-fheàrna a

the piles in crannogs. That is the logs that were fixing a crannog – an old home – in a loch [into the bed of the loch].

Here is the old tree-alphabet of the Gael – ailm, beith, coll, dair, eadha, feàrn, gort, iogh, luis, muin, nuin, onn, beith bhog, ruis, sùil, teine, ùr. Of the commonest trees that grow in the Highlands, it is just the birch and the alder that haven't changed their names.

And I have two other words for you connected with alder trees. To begin with – fàrdadh. That's the bark of the tree that is used to dye cloth black. Fàrdadh. And carraig. Dwelly tells us that it means a lump of wood and also a wooden ball with which people would play sport. And here is what the priest Father Allan wrote: carraig – 'a lumpy wooden excrescence on an alder tree used by children for a ball for shinty.' I wonder how far a carraig would travel if Ronald Ross [a famous shinty player] hit it with a shinty stick?!

chaidh a chleachdadh gu tric airson nam mòr-stoban ann an crannagan. 'S e sin na logaichean a bha a' suidheachadh crannag – seann dachaigh – ann an loch.

Seo agaibh seann aibidil chraobhach nan Gàidheal – ailm, beith, coll, dair, eadha, feàrn, gort, iogh, luis, muin, nuin, onn, beith bhog, ruis, sùil, teine, ùr. De na craobhan as bitheanta a dh'fhàsas air a' Ghàidhealtachd, 's e dìreach a' bheith agus an fheàrn nach do dh'atharraich an ainmean.

Agus tha dà fhacal eile agam dhuibh co-cheangailte ri craobhan-feàrna. An toiseach – fàrdadh. 'S e sin rùsg na craoibhe a thathar a' cleachdadh airson clò a dhathadh dubh. Fàrdadh. Agus carraig. Tha Dwelly ag innse dhuinn gu bheil e a' ciallachadh cnap fiodha agus cuideachd ball fiodha leis am biodh daoine a' cluich spòrs. Agus seo na sgrìobh an sagart Mgr Ailein: carraig – 'a lumpy wooden excrescence on an alder tree used by children for a ball for shinty.' Saoil dè cho fada 's a rachadh carraig nan toireadh Ragnall Ros sgleog dha le caman?!