

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 565 (which corresponds to Litir 869). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodgy.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

What's the Gaelic for 'white-legged' or 'white-footed'? Well, here is a way of saying that – geal-chasach or geala-chasach. Like a Scot on a beach in Spain at the beginning of summer – white-legged!

There is a place-name in the vicinity of Torridon in Wester Ross – 'the little white-footed clump of trees'. That place got the name from the birch trees that grow there. They're white at the bottom. They're white-footed.

Duncan Ban MacIntyre uses the word 'white' in different ways in his poetry. Here is an example from his poem 'Beinn Dòrain'. Duncan is describing a hind: She was 'quick of movement, long-limbed, spirited, eccentric, white-buttocked, white-tailed, timorous before a dog...' Geal-chèireach – 'white-buttocked'.

In another of his famous poems – The Misty Corrie – Duncan uses 'geal' in connection with the salmon. Here is part of the ninth verse:

*There is a white-bellied salmon
in the rugged corrie,
That comes from the ocean of the*

Dè a' Ghàidhlig a tha air 'white-legged' no 'white-footed'? Uill, seo agaibh dòigh air sin a ràdh – geal-chasach no geala-chasach. Mar Albannach air an tràigh san Spàinnt aig toiseach an t-samhraidh – geal-chasach!

Tha ainm-àite ann an sgìre Thoirbheartain ann an Ros an Iar – am Badan Geala-chasach. Fhuair an t-àite sin ainm bho na craobhan-beithe a tha a' fàs ann. Tha iad geal aig a' bhonn. Tha iad geal-chasach.

Tha Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir a' cleachdadh an fhacail 'geal' ann an diofar dhòighean anns a' bhàrdachd aige. Seo eisimpleir às an dàn aige 'Beinn Dòrain'. Tha Donnchadh a' dèanamh tuairisgeul de dh'eilid: Bha i 'grad-charach, fad-chasach, aigeannach, neònach, geal-chèireach, gasganach, gealtach ro mhadadh...' Geal-chèireach – 'white-buttocked'.

Ann an dàn ainmeil eile aige – Coire a' Cheathaich – tha Donnchadh a' cleachdadh 'geal' ann an co-cheangal ris a' bhradan. Seo pàirt dhen naoidheamh rann:

*Tha bradan tarr-gheal sa choire
gharbhlaich,
Tha tighinn on fhairge bu*

stormiest wave...

Tarr-gheal means 'white-bellied'. Tha bradan tarr-gheal sa choire gharbhlaich – 'there's a white-bellied salmon in the rough corrie'.

Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair is another great poet. Here he is using the word 'geal' in his famous poem, 'The Sugar Burn'. He is speaking to the place itself:

*how beautiful, fair-headed and dewy [is]
your soft white bog cotton of [the] hillocks.*

Do chanach caoin-gheal thom 'your soft white big-cotton of [the] hillocks'. Your soft white big-cotton of [the] hillocks'. Bog-cotton is indeed soft and white.

Finally, I'd like to tell you about a compound word that both Duncan Bàn and Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair used in their poetry. That is brisg-gheal 'clear, transparent, limpid'. Brisg-gheal. Both of them use it in connection with water. Here is a passage from 'The Sugar Burn':

*how sweet, transparent and pure [are the]
piles of water droplets and melodious sound;
the rapids of the Sugar Burn
making a smooth, fast murmuring...*

And a passage from Beinn Dòrain:

With the cleanliness of her water, Sweet-tasting and clear...

With the cleanliness of her water, sweet-tasting and clear. Le glainnead a h-uisge, gu maoth-bhlasta, brisg-gheal. That's one thing

ghailbheach tonn...

Tha tarr-gheal a' ciallachadh 'white-bellied'. Tha bradan tarr-gheal sa choire gharbhlaich – 'there's a white-bellied salmon in the rough corrie'.

B' e Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair sàr-bhàrd eile. Seo e a' cleachdadh an fhacail 'geal' anns an dàn ainmeil aige, 'Allt an t-Siùcair'. Tha e a' bruidhinn ris an àite fhèin:

*gur h-àlainn barr-fhionn,
braonach
do chanach caoin-gheal thom...*

Do chanach caoin-gheal thom 'your soft white big-cotton of [the] hillocks'. Do chanach caoin-gheal thom. Tha canach, gu dearbh, caoin-gheal.

Mu dheireadh, bu mhath leam innse dhuibh mu fhacal fillte a chleachd an dà chuid, Donnchadh Bàn agus Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, anns a' bhàrdachd aca. 'S e sin brisg-gheal 'clear, transparent, limpid'. Brisg-gheal. Tha an dithis ga chleachdadh ann an co-cheangal ri uisge. Seo earrann à Allt an t-Siùcair:

*Gur milis, brisg-gheal, bùrn-ghlan
meall-chùirneineach 's binn fuaim,
bras-shruthain Allt-an-t-Siùcair
ri torman siùbhlach, luath...*

Agus earrann à Beinn Dòrain:

Le glainnead a h-uisge

Gu maoth-bhlasta, brisg-gheal...

With the cleanliness of her water, sweet-tasting and clear. Le glainnead a h-uisge, gu maoth-bhlasta, brisg-gheal. 'S e sin aon rud a tha fìor mu Alba. Tha

that's true about Scotland. We have water in abundance. And most of it is [beautifully] clear. Goodbye.

uisge againn ann am pailteas. Agus tha a' chuid as motha dheth brisg-gheal.