

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 610 (which corresponds to Litir 914). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

In the autumn of last year I was in Mull. I was speaking to young and old about the Gaelic heritage associated with marine mammals. I gave them this traditional rhyme:

Seven herrings will fill a salmon,
Seven salmon will fill a seal,
Seven seals will fill a whale,
Seven whales will fill a Cìrean Cròin.

Do you understand 'sàth'? It means what something or somebody has to eat in order to be full or replete. A salmon will eat seven herrings before it is satisfied.

Seven herrings will fill a salmon,
Seven salmon will fill a seal,
Seven seals will fill a whale,
Seven whales will fill a Cìrean Cròin.

What on earth (under the sun) is, or was, a Cìrean Cròin? Nobody knows what it looked like. The primary school children, where I was working, made amazing drawings of it. Some of them were like large crabs. Some were like big octopuses. And some were like whales with scary teeth in their head!

Another form of the rhyme was recorded. And it isn't Cìrean Cròin that

As t-fhoghar an-uiridh bha mi ann am Muile. Bha mi a' bruidhinn ri sean is òg mu dhualchas na Gàidhlig co-cheangailte ri mamailean mara. Thug mi an rann traidiseanta seo dhaibh:

*Seachd sgadain sàth bradain,
Seachd bradain sàth ròin,
Seachd ròin sàth muice-mara,
Seachd mucan-mara sàth Cìrein Cròin.*

A bheil sibh a' tuigsinn 'sàth'? Tha e a' ciallachadh na dh'fheumas rudeigin ithe airson a bhith làn no sàsaichte. Bidh bradan ag ithe seachd sgadain mus bi e sàsaichte. Seo agaibh an rann a-rithist:

*Seachd sgadain sàth bradain,
Seachd bradain sàth ròin,
Seachd ròin sàth muice-mara,
Seachd mucan-mara sàth Cìrein Cròin.*

Dè fon ghrèin a tha ann, no a bha ann, an Cìrean Cròin? Chan eil fios aig duine dè an coltas a bha air. Rinn clann na bunsgoile, far an robh mi ag obair, dealbhan iongantach dheth. Bha cuid dhiubh coltach ri crùbagan mòra. Bha cuid coltach ri ochd-chasaich mhòra. Agus bha feadhainn coltach ri muc-mhara le fiaclan eagallach na ceann!

Chaidh dreach eile dhen rann a chlàradh. Agus chan e Cìrean Cròin a tha

the animal was called, but Cionaran-crò. This time, however, there is another creature even bigger than the Cionaran-crò:

Seven herrings will fill a salmon,
Seven salmon will fill a seal,
Seven seals will fill a small whale,
Seven small whales will fill a large whale,
Seven large whales will fill a cionaran-crò,
Seven cionaran-crò will fill a great sea leviathan.

What on earth is mial mhòr a' chuain? Well, it has been translated as Great Leviathan of the Sea. And the word mial is known in old Gaelic, meaning 'great creature' and 'whale'. In Irish Gaelic a whale is called a míol mór.

And do we have anything in oral tradition about the Cionaran-crò? Well, yes, in Carmina Gadelica, from Ness in the north of Lewis.

Alexander Carmichael got the story from a certain Angus Gunn. Angus was 84 years old. He was living for a long time on the island of Rona – a small island in the ocean north of Lewis. I'll give an account of Angus's story about the Cionaran-crò in the next Litir.

air a' bheathach, ach Cionaran-crò. An turas seo, ge-tà, tha creutair eadhon nas motha ann na 'n Cionaran-crò:

*Seachd sgadain sàth bradain,
Seachd bradain sàth ròin,
Seachd ròin sàth muc-mhara bheag,
Seachd mucan-mara beaga, sàth muc-mhara mhòr,
Seachd mucan-mara mòra, sàth cionarain-crò,
Seachd cionarain-crò, sàth mial mhòr a' chuain.*

Dè fon ghrèin a tha ann am mial mhòr a' chuain? Uill, chaidh eadar-theangachadh a dhèanamh air mar *Great Leviathan of the Sea*. Agus tha am facal *mial* aithnichte anns an t-seann Ghàidhlig, a' ciallachadh 'creutair mòr' agus 'muc-mhara'. 'S e *míol mór* a chanas daoine ri 'muc-mhara' ann an Gàidhlig na h-Èireann.

Agus a bheil càil againn ann am beul-aithris mun Chionaran-crò? Uill, tha ann an *Carmina Gadelica* à Nis ann an ceann a tuath Leòdhais.

Fhuair Alasdair MacIlleMhìcheil an stòiridh bho fhear, Aonghas Gunnach. Bha Aonghas ochdad 's a ceithir bliadhn' a dh'aois. Bha e a' fuireach fad ùine mhòr ann an Eilean Rònaigh – eilean beag anns a' chuan, tuath air Leòdhas. Nì mi cunntas air aithris Aonghais mun Chionaran-crò anns an ath Litir.