

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 659 (which corresponds to Litir 963). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

What is a loireag? According to Dwelly's dictionary, it means a handsome, shaggy cow, a small plump girl and a pancake. And two other things in addition – a petrel (a type of seabird) and a water-nymph or water-sprite.

I want to tell you about the final ones – the loireag as a supernatural creature, as was reported in Carmina Gadelica.

A loireag at one time lived next to the Beinn Mhòr in South Uist. There was also an old man living there. The loireag would suck the milk from his cow. His daughter tried to chase the loireag away. But she failed. She returned home. She told her father that the loireag and the cow were not listening to her.

The old man went to the door. He was swearing at the loireag and the cow. He threw a large stone at the loireag. But he missed her and hit the cow. He nearly killed the cow.

He took hold of the cow's horn. In the name of the gentle Columba, he asked the cow to leave. Columba's name was powerful. The loireag jumped away from the cow. And the cow jumped away from the loireag.

Dè tha ann an loireag? A rèir faclair Dwelly, tha e a' ciallachadh bò eireachdail mholach, caileag bheag reamhar agus bonnach no breacag. Agus dà rud eile a bharrachd – 'petrel' (seòrsa de dh'eun-mara) agus 'water-nymph' no 'water-sprite'.

Tha mi airson innse dhuibh mun fheadhainn mu dheireadh – an loireag mar chreutair os-nàdarrach, mar a chaidh aithris ann an Carmina Gadelica.

Bha loireag uaireigin a' fuireach làimh ris a' Bheinn Mhòir ann an Uibhist a Deas. Bha cuideachd bodach a' fuireach ann. Bhiodh an loireag a' deoghail a bhà. Dh'fheuch a nighean ri teicheadh a chur air an loireag. Ach cha deach leatha. Thill i don taigh. Dh'inns i do a h-athair nach robh an loireag no a' bhò ag èisteachd rithe.

Chaidh am bodach chun an dorais. Bha e a' mionnachadh air an loireag agus air a' bhò. Thilg e clach mhòr air an loireag. Ach chaill e i agus bhuail e a' bhò. Cha mhòr nach do mharbh e a' bhò.

Ghreimich e air adharc na bà. Ann an ainm Chaluim Chille chaoimh, dh'iarr e air a' bhò falbh. Bha ainm Chaluim Chille cumhachdach. Leum an loireag air falbh bhon bhò. Agus leum a' bhò air falbh bhon loireag.

The loireag fled to Coire Choradail north of the mountain. She started to sing. Here is what she sang:

Speckled female calves, Speckled female calves, Speckled female calves,
a storm in the deer-rut time.

Little old man from the base of the corrie, Little old man from the base of the corrie, Little old man from the base of the corrie, Coradal and Craigeo.

Little old man of the short coat, Little old man of the short coat, Little old man of the short coat, Circeadal and Cragabhig.

Little old man from the base of the pass, Little old man from the base of the pass, Little old man from the base of the pass, Strength to your hands, I wish well for your health, Speckled, female calves.

It's interesting to look for the place-names in the songs on the map. Coradal is there. But I didn't find Circeadal, Craigeo and Cragabhig.

And I don't know what happened to the loireag. As far as I know, she was never seen again.

Theich an loireag gu Coire Choradail tuath air a' bheinn. Thòisich i air seinn. Seo na sheinn i:

Laoigh bhreaca bhoireann, Laoigh bhreaca bhoireann, Laoigh bhreaca bhoireann, Doinnean anns an Dàmhair.

Bhodaich bhig à bun a' choire, Bhodaich bhig à bun a' choire, Bhodaich bhig à bun a' choire, Coradal agus Craigeo.

Bhodaich bhig a' chòta ghearra, Bhodaich bhig a' chòta ghearra, Bhodaich bhig a' chòta ghearra, Circeadal agus Cragabhig.

Bhodaich bhig à bun a' bhealaich, Bhodaich bhig à bun a' bhealaich, Bhodaich bhig à bun a' bhealaich, Treise dha do làmhaich, Mealam dhut do shlàinte, Laoigh bhreaca bhoireann.

Tha e inntinneach a bhith a' coimhead airson nan ainmean-àite anns an òran air a' mhapa. Tha Coradal ann. Ach cha do lorg mi Circeadal, Craigeo no Cragabhig.

Agus chan eil fhios a'm dè thachair don loireig. Fhad 's as aithne dhomh, chan fhacas tuilleadh i.