

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 726 (which corresponds to Litir 1,030). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.maclea@bbc.co.uk.

Do you know the word gibeann? Among other things, it means, according to Dwelly's dictionary, 'St Kilda pudding made of ... a mixture of fulmar fat, oatmeal etc. Said to be most sustaining and efficacious against coughs and kindred lung troubles.'

I was telling you last week about the account that the Skyeman, Martin Martin, made of St Kilda more than three hundred years ago. A Late Voyage to St Kilda. In the account, the author told us about the gibeann. That material was used as a cure for coughing that came on the islanders every time that a boat was appearing from another place. The disease was lasting up to a fortnight.

Martin explained that the St Kildans were mixing the gibeann with oatmeal. They made a porridge. They were taking the porridge as a cure for the disease.

People didn't understand at that time how diseases spread. Or how antibodies resist diseases. Martin was dubious about their story about the disease. But he asked everybody about the matter. They all agreed –

A bheil sibh eòlach air an fhacal gibeann? Am measg eile, tha e a' ciallachadh, a rèir Faclair Dwelly, 'St Kilda pudding made of ... a mixture of fulmar fat, oatmeal etc. Said to be most sustaining and efficacious against coughs and kindred lung troubles.'

Bha mi ag innse dhuibh an t-seachdain sa chaidh mun chunntas a rinn an Sgitheanach, Màrtainn MacIlleMhàrtainn, de Hiort o chionn còrr is trì cheud bliadhna. A Late Voyage to St Kilda. Anns a' chunntas, dh'inns an t-ùghdar dhuinn mun ghibeann. Bha an stuth sin air a chleachdadh mar leigheas airson casadaich a bha a' tighinn air na h-eileanaich gach turas a bha bàta a' nochdadh à àite eile. Bha an galar a' maireachdainn suas ri ceala-deug.

Mhìnich MacIlleMhàrtainn gun robh na Hiortaich a' measgachadh a' ghibein le min-choirce. Rinn iad brochan. Bha iad a' gabhail a' bhrochain mar leigheas airson a' ghalair.

Cha do thuig daoine aig an àm sin mar a tha galaran a' sgaoileadh. No mar a sheasas anti-cuirp an aghaidh ghalaran. Bha MacIlleMhàrtainn teagmhach mun sgeul aca mun ghalair. Ach chuir e ceist mun ghnòthach air a h-uile duine.

old and young – that it was true. Even babies on the breast weres suffering from it. The islanders were of the opinion that they were getting it from travellers that were living in their houses.

Not only that, but every time the St Kildans were going to another island, the coughing was coming on them in the same way. They would either have to take gibeane or go home to St Kilda to cure themselves. Oh, if physicians had listened to the St Kildans at that time – perhaps they would have learned a lot about the spread of diseases!

The disease must have appeared when Martin went there. But he wrote, as soon as it was cured with gibeane, that people were no longer coughing. That was even though they were all – two hundred and fifty people between St Kildans and strangers – coming together as a congregation for church services.

Dh'aontaich iad uile – sean is òg – gun robh e fìor. Bha eadhon leanaban air a' bhroilleach a' fulang leis. Bha na h-eileanaich dhen bheachd gun robh iad ga fhaighinn bho luchd-siubhail a bha a' fuireach anns na taighean aca.

Chan e sin a-mhàin, ach gach turas a bha Hiortaich a' dol gu eilean eile, bha a' chasadaich a' tighinn orra anns an aon dòigh. Dh'fheumadh iad an dàrna cuid gibeane fhaighinn no falbh dhachaigh a Hiort airson feabhas a thoirt orra fhèin. O, nam biodh lighichean air èisteachd ris na Hiortaich aig an àm sin – 's dòcha gun robh iad air mòran ionnsachadh mu sgaoileadh ghalaran!

Feumaidh gun do nochd an galar nuair a chaidh MacIlleMhàrtainn ann. Ach sgrìobh e, cho luath 's a bha e air a chur am feabhas le gibeane, nach robh casadaich air na daoine tuilleadh. Bha sin, eadhon ged a bha iad uile – dà cheud gu leth duine eadar Hiortaich is coigrich – a' tighinn cruinn còmhla mar choitheanal airson seirbheisean eaglais.