

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 791 (which corresponds to Litir 1,095). Ruairidh can be contacted at roddy.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

In which district of the Highlands is the best Gaelic spoken? What a question! I'm not going to offer an opinion!

In front of me is an article from the periodical 'An Gàidheal'. It appeared in 1924. The author was the Rev. William Gillies. He tells us that Highland students in the University of Edinburgh held a debate on the matter. That was a hundred years before. And the prize went to ... Perthshire.

Did that surprise you? The question was being debated early in the 19th century. The students had four reasons. Here they are:

It's in Perthshire that those who translated the Bible into Gaelic were born. They were the Rev. James Stewart from Killin and his son, John. Secondly, it's in Perthshire that the most renowned Gaelic bard was born – Dugald Buchanan.

The Rev. Alexander Stewart was from Perthshire. He was a minister in Moulin, near Pitlochry. He was born in Atholl. And, in the students' opinion, he wrote the best grammar book there was.

Dè an sgìre dhen Ghàidhealtachd anns a bheil a' Ghàidhlig as fheàrr? Abair ceist! Chan eil mi fhìn a' dol a thoirt beachd seachad!

Air mo bheulaibh, tha alt às an iris 'An Gàidheal'. Nochd e ann an naoi ceud deug, fichead 's a ceithir (1924). B' e an t-ùghdar An t-Urr. Uilleam MacGillÌosa. Tha e ag innse dhuinn gun robh deasbad aig oileanaich Ghàidhealach ann an Dùn Èideann air a' cheist. Bha sin ceud bliadhna roimhe. Agus, chaidh an duais gu ... Siorrachd Pheairt.

An do chuir sin iongnadh oirbh? Bhathar a' deasbad na ceist tràth anns an naoidheamh linn deug. Bha ceithir adhbharan aig na h-oileanaich. Seo iad:

'S ann an Siorrachd Pheairt a rugadh an fheadhainn a rinn eadar-theangachadh dhen Bhìoball gu Gàidhlig. B' iadsan an t-Urr. Seumas Stiùbhart à Cill Fhinn agus a mhac, Iain. Anns an dàrna àite, 's ann an Siorrachd Pheairt a rugadh am bàrd Gàidhlig a bu chliùitiche – Dùghall Bochanan.

Bha an t-Urr. Alasdair Stiùbhart à Siorrachd Pheairt. Bha e na mhinistear ann am Maoilinn, faisg air Baile Chloichridh. Rugadh e ann an Athall. Agus, ann am beachd nan oileanach, sgrìobh e an leabhar-gràmair a b' fheàrr a bha ann.

The fourth reason that Perthshire was so famous was that Robert Armstrong was born there. He wrote a really good Gaelic dictionary.

Most of the article in ‘An Gàidheal’ is about Armstrong. I’ll come to an account of his life yet. But, in the 20th century, were people still of the opinion that the best Gaelic was in Perthshire? Well, no. The Rev. Gillies says that Gaelic had fallen into poor circumstances. The Perthshire folk were mixing it with lots of English.

Now to Robert Armstrong. His ‘A Gaelic Dictionary in Two Parts’ came out in 1825. Armstrong was born in Kenmore, at the eastern end of Loch Tay, in 1788. There will be more about him in the next Litir.

B’ e an ceathramh adhbhar gun robh Siorrachd Pheairt cho ainmeil, gun do rugadh Raibeart Armstrong ann. Sgrìobh esan faclair Gàidhlig fìor mhath.

Tha a’ chuid as motha dhen alt anns ‘An Gàidheal’ mu dheidhinn Armstrong. Thig mi gu cunntas air a bheatha fhathast. Ach, anns an fhicheadamh linn, an robh daoine fhathast dhen bheachd gun robh a’ Ghàidhlig a b’ fheàrr ann an Siorrachd Pheairt? Uill, cha robh. Tha t-Urr. MacGillÌosa ag ràdh gun robh a’ Ghàidhlig air a dhol bhuaithe an sin. Bha na Peairtich ga measgachadh le tòrr Beurla.

A-nise, gu Raibeart Armstrong. Thàinig ‘A Gaelic Dictionary in Two Parts’ aige a-mach ann an ochd ceud deug, fichead ’s a còig (1825). Rugadh Armstrong anns a’ Cheannmhor, aig ceann an ear Loch Tatha, ann an seachd ceud deug, ochdad ’s a h-ochd (1788). Bidh tuilleadh mu dheidhinn anns an ath Litir.