

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 904 (which corresponds to Litir 1,208). Ruairidh can be contacted at fios@learngaelic.scot.

*Child of joy, Mary's child,
Born in the stable, King of the
Universe.*

*Who came to the wilderness and
suffered in our place,
Happy are those who are close to
him!*

*That is the first verse of the
famous hymn, Leanabh an Àigh. It's
a beautiful, tuneful hymn. I've always
had a question about one word,
however. Usually, it's Moire or
Muire we say in Gaelic for Jesus's
mother. But, in the song, she is
'Màiri'.*

*It's a woman from Mull, who
was named Mary, that wrote the
hymn. She was Mary MacDougal.
She belonged to the Ross of Mull near
Bunessan. Earlier this summer,
people were marking a hundred and
fifty years since she died.*

*Mary was a Christian. Her
father was a Baptist preacher. Mary
herself was a Baptist all her life. She
married Neil MacDonald. They were
crofting near Bunessan. I don't think
she spoke any English.*

*Mary wrote the words for
Leanabh an Àigh, but it appears that
the tune was much older. Here is the
second verse:*

*Leanabh an àigh, an Leanabh aig Màiri,
Rugadh san stàball, Rìgh nan Dùl;*

*Thàinig don fhàsach, dh'fhuiling nar n-
àite*

Son' iad an àireamh bhitheas dhà dlùth!

*Sin agaibh a' chiad rann dhen laoidh
ainmeil, Leanabh an Àigh. 'S e laoidh
brèagha, fonnmhor a tha ann. Bha riamh
ceist agam mu dheidhinn aon fhacail, ge-
tà. Mar as trice, 's e Moire no Muire a
chanas sinn ann an Gàidhlig ri màthair
Ìosa. Ach, anns an òran, 's e 'Màiri' a tha
ann.*

*'S e tè à Muile, air an robh Màiri
mar ainm, a sgrìobh an laoidh. B' ise
Màiri NicDhùghaill. Bhuineadh i don
Ros Mhuileach faisg air Bun Easan. Na
bu tràithe dhen t-samhradh seo, bha
daoine a' comharrachadh ceud gu leth
bliadhna on a chaochail i.*

*Bha Màiri na Crìosdaidh. Bha a h-
athair na shearmonaiche Baisteach. Bha
Màiri fhèin na Baisteach fad a beatha.
Phòs i fear Niall Dòmhnallach. Bha iad ri
croitearachd faisg air Bun Easan. Cha
chreid mi gun robh Beurla sam bith aice.*

*Sgrìobh Màiri na briathran airson
Leanabh an Àigh, ach tha e coltach gun
robh am fonn mòran na bu shine. Seo
agaibh an dàrna rann:*

Although the kings of the earth have children,

*In great pomp and much joy,
They leave soon and grow weak,*

Their beauty and form withering in the soil.

Leanabh an Àigh appeared in print after Mary's death. And it was also translated into English. In 1931, English words appeared that were connected with the same tune. That was 'Morning has Broken', a hymn that was often sung at funerals. The singer Cat Stevens – or Yusuf Islam – made that hymn famous in the seventies.

Here is its last verse:

*Child of joy as the prophets foretold,
And the high angels, he was the desire
of their eyes,*

It is he that deserves our love and respect.

Happy are those who are close to him.

Ged a bhios leanaban aig rìghrean na talmhainn,

*An greadhnachas àrd is anabarr mùirn,
'S geàrr gus am falbh iad, 's fàsaidh iad anfhann,*

An àilleachd 's an dealbh a' searg san ùir.

Nochd Leanabh an Àigh ann an clò an dèidh bàs Màiri. Agus bha e air eadar-theangachadh gu Beurla cuideachd. Ann an naoi ceud deug, trithead 's a h-aon (1931), nochd faclan Beurla co-cheangailte ris an aon fhonn. B' e sin 'Morning has Broken', laoidh a bh' air a sheinn gu tric aig tiodhlacaidhean. Rinn an seinneadair Cat Stevens – no Yusuf Islam – an laoidh sin ainmeil anns na seachdadan.

Seo agaibh an rann mu dheireadh dheth:

Leanabh an àigh mar dh'aithris na fàidhean,

*'S na h-aingealan àrd, b' e miann an sùl,
'S e 's airidh air gràdh 's ar n-urram thoirt dha.*

Sona an àireamh [a] bhitheas dha dlùth