

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 943 (which corresponds to Litir 1,247). Ruairidh can be contacted at fios@learngaelic.scot.

From time to time I run courses, looking at maps of the Highlands. Near the end of the course, I ask the students to create an imaginary island. They populate it with Gaelic place-names.

I also ask them to create a name for the island. It's amazing how often they call it 'the island of the seals'. But, in actual fact, names like that are rare. There is 'the loch of the seals', 'the point of the seals', 'the skerry of the seals' and so on. But I know [of] only two islands called 'the island of the seals'.

One of them is small. It's close to Oronsay, next to Colonsay, in Argyll.

The other one is in the far north of Scotland, in the Mackay Country. It's at the mouth of the Kyle of Tongue. In 1881, there were more than seventy people living there. But the last ones left the island in 1938.

One of the islanders, Donald Mackay, speaks on Tobar an Dualchais. When he was young, the herring fishing was big. In the winter, they would be fishing for lobsters.

Bho àm gu àm bidh mi a' ruith chùrsaichean, a' toirt sùil air mapaichean na Gàidhealtachd. Faisg air deireadh a' chùrsa, bidh mi ag iarraidh air na h-oileanaich eilean mac-meanmnach a chruthachadh. Bidh iad a' cur ainmean-àite Gàidhlig air.

Bidh mi cuideachd ag iarraidh orra ainm a chruthachadh airson an eilein. Tha e iongantach cho tric 's a bhios iad a' gabhail 'Eilean nan Ròn' air. Ach, ann an dha-rìribh, tha ainmean mar sin gann. Tha Loch nan Ròn ann, Rubha nan Ròn, Sgeir nan Ròn is mar sin air adhart. Ach 's aithne dhomh dìreach dà eilean air a bheil 'Eilean nan Ròn'.

Tha fear dhiubh beag. Tha e faisg air Eilean Orasa, làimh ri Colbhasa, ann an Earra-Ghàidheal.

Tha am fear eile ann am fìor cheann a tuath na h-Alba, ann an Dùthaich MhicAoidh. Tha e aig beul Caolas Thunga. Ann an ochd ceud deug, ochdad 's a h-aon (1881), bha còrr is seachdad duine a' fuireach ann. Ach dh'fhàg an fheadhainn mu dheireadh an t-eilean ann an naoi ceud deug, trithead 's a h-ochd (1938).

Tha fear de na h-eileanaich, Dòmhnall MacAoidh, a' bruidhinn mun eilean air Tobar an Dualchais. Nuair a bha e òg, bha iasgach an sgadain gu math mòr. Anns a' gheamhradh bhiodh iad ri iasgach a' ghiomaich.

Donald reckoned that there was a population there before the clearances. Their wives were from various places on the north coast. Some of them were from Orkney. They learned Gaelic because Gaelic was what the islanders spoke as a community language. However, the school education, or most of it, was in English.

The middle of the island, where the township was, is somewhat fertile. Barley and oats and peas were grown. As were potatoes and cabbage. Donald Mackay reckoned you wouldn't get better cabbage than they had in Eilean nan Ròn.

Donald remembered hunting the seals where he was young. But it wasn't for meat that the islanders were hunting them. I'll tell you more about that next week.

Bha Dòmhnall dhen bheachd gun robh sluagh a' fuireach ann ro na fuadaichean. Bha na mnathan aca à diofar àiteachan air a' chosta mu thuath. Bha feadhainn dhiubh à Arcaibh. Dh'ionnsaich iadsan Gàidhlig oir 's e Gàidhlig a bha aig na h-eileanaich mar chanan coimhearsnachd. Ge-tà, bha foghlam na sgoile, no a' chuid a bu mhotha dheth, ann am Beurla.

Tha meadhan an eilein, far an robh am baile, rudeigin torrach. Bhathar a' fàs eòrna is coirce is peasair ann. Bha, agus buntàta is càl. Bha Dòmhnall MacAoidh dhen bheachd nach fhaigheadh tu càl na b' fheàrr na bha aca ann an Eilean nan Ròn.

Bha cuimhne aig Dòmhnall air sealg nan ròn nuair a bha e òg. Ach cha b' ann airson feòil a bha na h-eileanaich gan sealg. Innsidh mi tuilleadh dhuibh mu dheidhinn sin an-ath-sheachdain.