

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 947 (which corresponds to Litir 1,251). Ruairidh can be contacted at fios@learngaelic.scot.

Raineach or bracken fern is a plague in the Highlands, isn't it? It covers mountain sides and old agricultural land. It smothers small plants and tree saplings. It's difficult to walk through an area where the bracken is tall and dense. And that's a good habitat for ticks. Wouldn't it be good to find a way to control bracken?

Well, I was reading an old book the other day. The author was naming three ways to kill bracken. In the first instance, by cutting it to the ground often. The second way was to put a lot of manure on it.

And the third way – the best way – was to pour urine on it. The author didn't tell us if the men of the township would do the job by urinating on the bracken!

The man who wrote the account was the Rev. John Lightfoot, a natural historian. He lived in the eighteenth century. He wrote the famous book *Flora Scotica*. Lightfoot reckoned that bracken was more useful than damaging. For example, some people were using bracken stalks as thatch on their houses.

And it was useful on the ground. Some people were leaving cut green

Tha raineach no bracken fern na plàigh air a' Ghàidhealtachd, nach eil? Tha i a' còmhdachadh leòidean beinne agus seann talamh-àitich. Tha i a' mùchadh lusan beaga agus fiùrain craoibhe. Tha e doirbh coiseachd tro raon far a bheil an raineach àrd agus tiugh. Agus sin àrainn mhath airson ghartan. Nach biodh e math dòigh a lorg airson smachd fhaighinn air raineach?

Uill, bha mi a' leughadh seann leabhar an latha eile. Bha an t-ùghdar ag ainmeachadh trì dòighean airson raineach a mharbhadh. Anns a' chiad dol a-mach, le bhith ga gearradh sìos gu talamh gu tric. B' e an dàrna dòigh le bhith a' cur tothar oirre ann am pailteas.

Agus b' e an treas dòigh – an dòigh a b' fheàrr – a bhith a' dòrtadh mùn oirre. Cha do dh'inns an t-ùghdar dhuinn co-dhiù dhèanadh fir a' bhaile a' chùis le bhith a' mùn air an rainich!

B' e am fear a sgrìobh an cunntas an t-Urramach Iain Lightfoot, eòlaiche-nàdair. Bha e beò anns an ochdamh linn deug. Sgrìobh e an leabhar ainmeil *Flora Scotica*. Bha Lightfoot dhen bheachd gun robh barrachd feum ann an raineach na bha ann de chron. Mar eisimpleir, bha cuid a' cleachdadh ghasan rainich mar thughadh air na taighean aca.

Agus bha i feumail air an talamh. Bha feadhainn a' fàgail raineach uaine

bracken on the ground to rot, and that was fertilising the ground. It was excellent as manure for potatoes.

Lightfoot tells us that some people were making a sort of soap from bracken. They were cutting the plant when it was green. They were burning it. The ashes were mixed with water to make small balls. People were drying the balls and using them to clean linen – in place of soap.

There was a market for the ashes, according to Lightfoot. In the Western Isles, many people were making a great profit by selling bracken ash to people who were making soap or glass with it. It's a pity there isn't still an opportunity to make a profit from bracken!

gheàrrte air an talamh airson lobhadh, agus bha sin a' cur ri torachas na talmhainn. Bha i fìor mhath mar thodhar airson buntàta.

Tha Lightfoot ag innse dhuinn gun robh feadhainn a' dèanamh nàdar de shiabann à raineach. Bha iad a' gearradh an lusa nuair a bha i uaine. Bha iad ga losgadh. Bha an luathre air a measgachadh le uisge airson buill bheaga a dhèanamh. Bha daoine a' tiormachadh nam ball agus gan cleachdadh airson anart a ghlanadh – an àite siabann.

Bha margaidh ann airson na luathre, a rèir Lightfoot. Anns na h-Eileanan Siar, bha gu leòr de dhaoine a' dèanamh prothaid mhòr le bhith a' reic luathre rainich do dhaoine a bha a' dèanamh siabann no glainne leatha. Is truagh e nach eil cothrom ann fhathast prothaid a dhèanamh à raineach!