

An Litir Bheag

Ie 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 1,088 (which corresponds to Litir 1,392). Ruairidh can be contacted at fios@learngaelic.scot.

I was telling you about Jock Stephen, a bellman/town crier in Inverness in the 19th century. He belonged to the town. He built a reputation as a hunter of birds. He was keeping a small bird in a cage. The bird was calling, and other birds would be attracted to it. Jock was smearing a sticky substance on branches near the cage, and the birds were getting stuck in it.

It wasn’t for eating them that Jock was catching them. He was selling them to people. Often, he was hunting near Inverness harbour – on Cromwell’s old fort [site]. He was catching linnets there. He was hunting in another place where he got goldfinches. And in Culloden Woods he got blackbirds and thrushes.

In the account I was reading about Jock, he was out in the Culloden Woods one time. He was with a shoemaker called Sandie Gordon. The two men knew each other well.

‘Listen to the birds,’ said Jock. ‘They are singing Gordanaich dubh, Gòrdanaich dubh, fàg a’ choille! Black Gordon, Black Gordon, leave the wood!’

Bha mi ag innse dhuibh mu Iain Stephen, fear-cluig ann an Inbhir Nis anns an naoidheamh linn deug. Bhuineadh e don bhaile. Choisinn e cliù mar shealgair eun. Bha e a’ cumail eun beag ann an cèidse. Bha an t-eun a’ gairm agus bhiodh eòin eile air an tarraing thuige. Bha Iain a’ smeuradh stuth steigeach air geugan faisg air a’ chèidse agus bha na h-eòin a’ dol an sàs ann.

Cha b’ ann airson an ithe a bha Iain gan glacadh. Bha e gan reic do dhaoine. Gu tric, bha e a’ sealg faisg air cala Inbhir Nis – air an t-seann dùn aig Crombail. Bha e a’ glacadh bhigeanan-Brìde – no linnets – an sin. Bha e a’ sealg ann an àite eile far an d’ fhuair e lasraichean-coille, no goldfinches. Agus ann an Coille Chùil Lodair, fhuair e loin-dubha, blackbirds, agus smeòraich, no thrushes.

Anns a’ chunntas a bha mi a’ leughadh mu Iain, bha e a-muigh ann an Coille Chùil Lodair turas. Bha e cuide ri greusaiche air an robh Sandie Gordon mar ainm. Bha an dithis gu math eòlach air a chèile.

‘Èist ris na h-eòin,’ thuir Iain. ‘Tha iad a’ seinn – Gordanaich dubh, Gòrdanaich dubh, fàg a’ choille! Black Gordon, Black Gordon, leave the wood!’

Gordon replied, ‘Be quiet. It’s saying – Iain a’ chluig, Iain a’ chluig! Tha am peathair a’ tighinn! John of the bell, John of the bell! The forester is coming!’

The thing that is interesting about that conversation is that it is in Gaelic. That proves to us that both of them had Gaelic. I’m returning to the question – would John as a bellman report the news to the people of Inverness in both languages? I don’t know.

Iain had a weakness or two – particularly snuff and whisky. One day, he was working as a bellman and he was drunk. He was warned that he must give up alcohol. Otherwise, he would lose his job. From then on, he was abstemious and sober.

Fhreagair an Gòrdanach, ‘Ist. Tha e ag ràdh – Iain a’ chluig, Iain a’ chluig! Tha am peathair a’ tighinn!’ *John of the bell, John of the bell! The forester is coming!’*

’S e an rud a tha inntinneach mun chòmhradh sin gur ann an Gàidhlig a bha e. Tha sin a’ dearbhadh dhuinn gun robh Gàidhlig aig an dithis. Tha mi a’ tilleadh chun na ceist – am biodh Iain mar fhear-cluig ag aithris nan naidheachdan do mhuinntir Inbhir Nis anns an dà chànan? Chan eil fhios a’ m.

Bha laigse no dhà aig Iain – gu sònraichte snaoisean agus uisge-beatha. Latha a bha seo, bha e ag obair mar fhear-cluig agus bha e air mhisg. Chaidh rabhadh a thoirt dha gu feumadh e sguir dhen deoch-làidir. Air neo gun cailleadh e a dhreuchd. Bho sin a-mach bha Iain stuama, sòbair.