

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 1,089 (which corresponds to Litir 1,393). Ruairidh can be contacted at fios@learngaelic.scot.

Perhaps people don't remember Mary MacKellar as they should. She was a poetess from Lochaber. She lived in the 19th century. Here is the first verse of her poem 'An Iarraidh Dhìomhain' or, in English, 'The Vain Search':

*Where is there peace and
where is there quiet,
Where is there peace and
where is there quiet,
Where is a cure for a
melancholic heart
Or where is there rest from
horror and torment?*

In the poem, I reckon Mary is making a commentary on her own life, a life that was challenging at times. Here is the seventh verse:

*I sought peace although the
world is without peace,
And I laid my head on the fair
breast of my beloved,
That pillow was full of rose
petals
But, alas, among them was
the customary thorn.*

Mary Cameron – for she was a Cameron – was born in Fort William in 1834. Her father was a

Math dh'fhaodte nach eil daoine a' cuimhneachadh Màiri NicEalair mar bu chòir. B' ise bana-bhàrd à Loch Abar. Bha i beò anns an naoidheamh linn deug. Seo a' chiad rann dhen dàn aice – 'An Iarraidh Dhìomhain' no, ann am Beurla, 'The Vain Search':

*Càit a bheil fois, agus càit a bheil
tàmh,
Càit a bheil fois, agus càit a bheil
tàmh,
Càit a bheil ìocshlaint do chridhe
fo phràmh
No càit a bheil suaimhneas o
uamhann 's o chràdh?*

Anns an dàn, saoilidh mi gu bheil Màiri a' dèanamh iomradh air a beatha fhèin, beatha a bha dùbhlanaich aig amannan. Seo an seachdamh rann:

*Dh'iarr mi gu fois, is gun fhois air
an t-saoghal,
Is leig mi mo cheann air geal-
bhroilleach mo ghaoil,
'S bha 'chluasag ud làn de chaoin-
dhuilleach nan ròs
Ach, ochan, nam measg gun robh
dris mar bu nòs.*

Rugadh Màiri Chamshron – oir 's e Camshronach a bha innte – anns a' Ghearasdan ann an ochd ceud deug,

baker in that town. When she was young, Mary was living with her maternal grandparents. That was in Corriebeg, a village on Loch Eil-side.

There, Mary was immersed in the oral tradition and language of the Gaels. She got a lot of Gaelic in school as well. But her father died when Mary was thirteen years of age. She had to move back to Fort William.

She didn't have educational opportunities. She was in domestic service for a while. And, at the age of twenty, she married a mariner from Argyll, John MacKellar.

John bought a cargo vessel. He was the captain on her. Matters were not easy, however. Money was tight, and John was often away at sea. Mary was living in Glasgow or Fort William. But she grew fed up of the situation, and she went to live on board the vessel. She sailed to many sea-ports across Europe. She commenced a career as a writer when she was on board, as we'll see in the next Litir.

trithead 's a ceithir (1834). Bha a h-athair na fhuineadair anns a' bhaile sin. Nuair a bha i òg, bha Màiri a' fuireach còmhla ri a seana-phàrantan air taobh a màthar. Bha sin anns a' Choire Bheag, baile beag taobh Loch Iall.

An sin, bha Màiri air a bogadh ann an beul-aithris agus cànan nan Gàidheal. Fhuair i tòrr Gàidhlig san sgoil cuideachd. Ach chaochail a h-athair nuair a bha Màiri trì bliadhn' deug a dh'aois. Bha aice ri gluasad air ais don Ghearasdan.

Cha robh cothroman foghlaim aice. Bha i ri muinntireas greis. Agus, aig aois fichead bliadhna, phòs i maraiche à Earra-Ghàidheal, Iain MacEalair.

Cheannaich Iain bàta-carago. Bha e na sgiobair oirre. Cha robh cùisean furasta, ge-tà. Bha airgead teann, agus bha Iain gu tric air falbh aig muir. Bha Màiri a' fuireach ann an Glaschu no anns a' Ghearasdan. Ach dh'fhàs i searbh dhen t-suidheachadh, agus chaidh i a dh'fhuireach air bòrd an t-soithich. Sheòl i gu iomadh port-mara air feadh na Roinn Eòrpa. Thòisich i air dreuchd mar sgrìobhadair nuair a bha i air bòrd, mar a ch'inn anns an ath Litir.