

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 1,112 (which corresponds to Litir 1,416). Ruairidh can be contacted at fios@learnghaelic.scot.

We have been marking the life of a first-class scholar this year. He was Uilleam MacBhatair or William J. Watson, the prime Scottish place-name scholar in the twentieth century.

Watson was born in 1865. He died in 1948. Thus, why is his life being marked this year – in 2026? Well, because his tome appeared in print a hundred years ago, in 1926. That was 'The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland'.

I re-read that book recently. And one thing in particular caught my attention. It opened a door into Watson's own personal situation.

He was raised in Easter Ross. He was fluent in Gaelic and English. He wrote about how the Gaels there would be inserting Gaelic words in their English. For example, they would say, 'I have a meanmhainn in my nose'. Dwelly's dictionary tells us that meanmhainn means 'titillation

Tha sinn air a bhith a' comharrachadh beatha sàr-sgoileir am-bliadhna. B' esan Uilleam MacBhatair no William J. Watson, prìomh sgoilear ainmean-àite na h-Alba anns an fhicheadamh linn.

Rugadh MacBhatair ann an ochd ceud deug, seasgad 's a còig (1865). Chaochail e ann an naoi ceud deug, ceathrad 's a h-ochd (1948). Mar sin, carson a thathar a' comharrachadh a bheatha am-bliadhna – ann an dà mhìle, fichead 's a sia (2026)? Uill, tha a chionn 's gun do nochd an leabhar mòr mòr aige ann an clò o chionn ceud bliadhna, ann an naoi ceud deug, fichead 's a sia (2026). B' e sin 'The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland'.

Leugh mi an leabhar sin às ùr o chionn ghoirid. Agus thog aon rud m' aire gu sònraichte. Dh'fhosgail e doras a-steach don t-suidheachadh phearsanta aig MacBhatair fhèin.

Thogadh e ann an Ros an Ear. Bha e fileanta ann an Gàidhlig agus Beurla. Sgrìobh e mu mar a bhiodh na Gàidheil an sin a' stobadh faclan Gàidhlig a-steach don Bheurla aca. Mar eisimpleir, chanadh iad, 'I have a meanmhainn in my nose'. Tha faclair Dwelly ag innse dhuinn gu bheil meanmhainn a' ciallachadh 'titillation of

of the nose, an omen of a stranger's arrival or of good news'.

The people of Easter Ross would say to a child that wouldn't eat their porridge '[that] you'll be a taibhse' i.e. a phantom. And they would say about a pithless man 'that there was nothing in him but a blianach i.e. a meagre creature.' Do you have an English word for 'blianach'?

As some in Easter Ross became fluent in English, they would tease those who used Gaelic words and phrases in their own English. There was a man who went to a shop in Invergordon. He asked the shopkeeper to give him a 'beef-uain', that is 'a beef of lamb'. That is what the man called 'mutton'. Henceforth he had a new nickname – Beef-uain!

Those words did not survive in the English of Easter Ross. You will hardly ever hear them today.

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Chanadh muinntir Rois an Ear ri pàiste nach itheadh a lite '[that] you'll be a taibhse' i.e. a phantom. Agus chanadh iad mu dheidhinn duine a bha gun smior 'that there was nothing in him but a blianach i.e. a meagre creature.' A bheil facal Beurla agaibh fhèin airson 'blianach'?

Mar a dh'fhàs cuid ann an Ros an Ear fileanta ann am Beurla, bhiodh iad a' tarraing às an feadhainn a chleachdadh faclan is abairtean Gàidhlig anns a' Bheurla aca fhèin. Bha fear ann a chaidh gu bùth ann an Inbhir Ghòrdain. Dh'iarr e air fear na bùtha 'beef-uain' sin *beef of lamb* a thoirt dha. 'S e sin a bha aig an duine air 'mutton'. Bho sin a-mach bha aithnig ùr aige – 'Beef-uain'!

Cha do mhair na faclan sin ann am Beurla Rois an Ear. Is gann gun cluinnear iad an-diugh.