

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 323 (which corresponds to Litir 627). Ruairidh can be contacted at roddy.macleon@bbc.co.uk.

I was telling you about Taigh nam Bodach – or Taigh na Cailliche – in Gleann Cailliche in Perthshire. The word cailleach can mean many things. Here's what Dwelly has: old woman, nun and supernatural or malign influence dwelling in dark caves, woods and corries. We have many stories about the cailleachs who were living in the mountains. I [have] found more than a hundred place names in Scotland in which there is the word 'cailleach'.

The scholar Anne Ross collected oral tradition about the Cailleach. She says it was an old practice. She wrote about 'the genuine antiquity of the cult'. The local people were looking upon the Cailleach as a kindly spirit.

Here is the story Anne Ross got from oral tradition: One terrible winter's day a long time ago, there was snow and blizzards. A man and woman came down from a mountain in the glen. They were incredibly large.

They asked the local people for shelter and hospitality. They got that. The people were kind to them. They built them a thatched house. The man and woman were pleased.

Bha mi ag innse dhuibh mu Thaigh nam Bodach – no Taigh na Cailliche – ann an Gleann Cailliche ann an Siorrachd Pheairt. Tha iomadh ciall air an fhacal *cailleach*. Seo na tha aig Dwelly: *old woman, nun agus supernatural or malign influence dwelling in dark caves, woods and corries*. Tha iomadh stòiridh againn mu na cailleachan a bha a' fuireach anns na beanntan. Lorg mi còrr is ceud ainm-àite ann an Alba anns a bheil am facal 'cailleach'.

Chruinnich an t-eòlaiche Anna Ros beul-aithris mun Chaillich. Tha i ag ràdh gur e seann chleachdadh a tha ann. Sgrìobh i mu 'the genuine antiquity of the cult'. Bha muinntir an àite a' coimhead air a' Chaillich mar spiorad coibhneil.

Seo an stòiridh a fhuair Anna Ros à beul-aithris: Air droch latha geamhraidh o chionn fhada, bha cur-is-cathadh ann. Thàinig fear agus bean sìos far beinn anns a' ghleann. Bha iad anabarrach mòr.

Dh'iarr iad fasnachadh is aogheachd bho mhuinntir an àite. Fhuair iad sin. Bha na daoine coibhneil dhaibh. Thog iad taigh-tughaidh dhaibh. Thug sin toileachas don fhear is bean.

The woman was expecting a child. She gave birth to a daughter. The weather was always favourable when the family were living in the glen. The livestock were healthy. The crops were good.

But a day came when the family had to leave. They made a promise. They said, if their house were kept in order, and if the local people kept them in [their] memory, that the winters would be calm and the summers warm..

In memory of everything that happened a small 'house' was built. It was in the shape of the thatched house the family had had. At Beltane every year, the three stones, that were representing the three 'gods' – the Cailleach, Bodach and Nighean – were brought out..

During the day before Halloween, they were put inside again. That was in order to keep them warm and comfortable during the winter. And the practice is still carried on today.

Bha am boireannach trom le leanabh. Rugadh nighean dhi. Bha an aimsir an-còmhnaidh fàbharach nuair a bha an teaghlach a' fuireach anns a' ghleann. Bha an sprèidh fallain. Bha am bàrr math.

Ach thàinig latha nuair a bha aig an teaghlach ri falbh. Thug iad gealltanas seachad. Thuirt iad, nam biodh an taigh aca air a chumail an òrdugh, agus nam biodh muinntir an àite gan cumail an cuimhne, gum biodh na geamhraidhean ciùin agus na samhraidhean blàth.

Mar chuimhneachan air a h-uile càil a thachair, chaidh 'taigh' beag a thogail. Tha e ann an cruth an taigh-tughaidh a bha aig an teaghlach. Aig a' Bhealltainn a h-uile bliadhna, bha na trì clachan, a bha a' riochdachadh nan trì "diathan" – a' Chailleach, am Bodach agus an Nighean – air an toirt a-mach.

Air an latha ro Oidhche Shamhna, bha iad air an cur a-steach a-rithist. Bha sin airson an cumail blàth is cofhurtail fad a' gheamhraidh. Agus tha an cleachdadh a' dol fhathast.