

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 356 (which corresponds to Litir 660). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.macleane@bbc.co.uk.

I was telling you about the brisgean, or silverweed. It is plentiful where there is sand. It is plentiful on the island machairs.

I tried the silverweed once. I didn't think much of it. The old Gaels were eating it when food was scarce. But were they eating it at other times?

I was reading about native tribes in North America. That was in the west, between Washington and Alaska. They were growing their own silverweed. They were keeping other plants out. The roots of the silverweed were growing big. The people were harvesting the silverweed in the autumn. They were storing it over the winter. The taste is best in autumn.

Was the same thing true in Scotland? Were our ancestors growing the silverweed? Well, yes. In Carmina Gadelica, Alexander Carmichael tells us, before the potato appeared in the islands, that people were growing the silverweed. It was reaching a large size when growing on its own. Here's what he wrote: "As certain places are noted for the cultivation of the potato, so certain places are remembered for the cultivation of silverweed".

Bha mi ag innse dhuibh mun *bhrisgean*, no *silverweed*. Tha e pailt far a bheil gainmheach. Tha e pailt air machraichean nan eilean.

Dh'fheuch mi am brisgean turas. Cha do shaoil mi mòran dheth. Bha na seann Ghàidheil ga ithe nuair a bha biadh gann. Ach an robh iad ga ithe aig amannan eile?

Bha mi a' leughadh mu threubhan dùthchasach ann am Ameireagaidh a Tuath. Bha sin air an taobh an iar, eadar Washington is Alasga. Bha iad a' fàs a' bhrisgein aca fhèin. Bha iad a' cumail lusan eile a-mach. Bha freumhan a' bhrisgein a' fàs mòr. Bha na daoine a' buain a' bhrisgein as t-fhoghar. Bha iad ga stòradh thairis air a' gheamhradh. 'S ann as t-fhoghar as fheàrr a tha am blas.

An robh an aon rud fìor ann an Alba? An robh ar sinnsearan a' fàs a' bhrisgein? Uill, bha. Ann an *Carmina Gadelica*, tha Alasdair MacIlleMhìcheil ag innse dhuinn, mus do nochd am buntàta anns na h-eileanan, gun robh daoine a' fàs a' bhrisgein. Bha e a' ruigsinn meudachd mhòr nuair a bha e a' fàs leis fhèin. Seo na sgrìobh e: "As certain places are noted for the cultivation of the potato, so certain places are remembered for the cultivation of silverweed".

He names a place in North Uist. People were living on the silverweed there. Well, that's what he says himself. I'd say that they were eating plenty of other things as well.

Anyway, Carmichael attests that the Gaels were growing the silverweed, just as the native Americans were. From the time of the hunters and gatherers to the age of the farmers, I'd say that Scots were eating the silverweed. And, even when the potato came, some were still eating the silverweed.

It has two other names – “spring carrot”, a name that is transparent enough, and “the seventh bread”. “Blessed silverweed of the spring, the seventh bread of the Gael”. In spring, when food was scarce, people were eating the silverweed. The seventh bread. But what were the six others? We'll look at that in the next Litir.

Tha e ag ainmeachadh àite ann an Uibhist a Tuath. Bha daoine beò air a' bhrisgean an sin. Uill, 's e sin a chanas e fhèin. Chanainn gun robh iad ag ithe gu leòr de rudan eile cuideachd.

Co-dhiù, tha MacIlleMhìcheil a' dearbhadh gun robh na Gàidheil a' fàs a' bhrisgein, dìreach mar a bha na tùsanaich Ameireaganach. Bho linn nan sealgairean is luchd-cruinneachaidh gu linn nan tuathanach, chanainn gun robh Albannaich ag ithe a' bhrisgein. Agus, eadhon nuair a thàinig am buntàta, bha cuid fhathast ag ithe a' bhrisgein.

Tha dà ainm eile air – *curran-earraich*, ainm a tha follaiseach gu leòr, agus *an seachdamh aran*. “Brisgean beannaichte an Earraich, seachdamh aran a' Ghàidheil”. As t-Earrach, nuair a bha biadh gann, bha daoine ag ithe a' bhrisgein. An seachdamh aran. Ach dè na sia eile a bha ann? Bheir sinn sùil air sin anns an ath Litir.