

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 364 (which corresponds to Litir 668). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

Thomas Garnett wrote the book *Observations on a Tour Through the Highlands and Part of the Western Isles of Scotland*. He was on a journey in the Highlands in 1798.

Garnett tells about his journey south of Inverness. It was tiring. But there was one good thing about it. There were milestones. The stones were telling them how far it was to the next settlement.

When there were no milestones, they were asking local people, "How far is it to [such and such a place]?" The people were saying perhaps "six miles". Garnett and Watts were riding another mile or two. They were asking another person how far it was. He or she was saying, "Six or seven miles"! That really got under Garnett's skin, apparently.

That was when people spoke English – or a little, at least. But they met many people who were not willing – or able – to speak English to them. His companion Mr Watts, the artist, had learned a little Gaelic before they started. "Instead of being useful," Garnett wrote, "my friend's knowledge of this language seemed to perplex us..."

Sgrìobh Tòmas Garnett an leabhar *Observations on a Tour Through the Highlands and Part of the Western Isles of Scotland*. Bha e air chuairt air a' Ghàidhealtachd ann an seachd ceud deug, naochad 's a h-ochd (1798).

Tha Garnett ag innse mun turas deas air Inbhir Nis. Bha e sgìtheil. Ach bha aon rud math mu dheidhinn. Bha clachan-mìle ann. Bha na clachan ag innse dhaibh dè cho fada 's a bha e don ath bhaile.

Nuair nach robh clachan-mìle ann, bha iad a' faighneachd de mhuinntir an àite, "Dè cho fada 's a tha e gu [leithid de dh'àite]?" Bha na daoine ag ràdh 's dòcha "sia mìle". Bha Garnett is Watts a' marcachd mìle no dhà a bharrachd. Bha iad a' faighneachd de chuideigin eile dè cho fada 's a bha e. Bha esan no ise ag ràdh, "Sia no seachd mìle"! Bha sin a' sàrachadh Gharnett, a rèir choltais.

Bha sin nuair a bha Beurla – no beagan co-dhiù – aig na daoine. Ach thachair iad ri mòran nach robh deònach – no comasach – Beurla a bhruidhinn riutha. Bha a chompanach Mgr Watts, am fear-ealain, air beagan Gàidhlig ionnsachadh mus do thòisich iad. "An àite a bhith feumail," sgrìobh Garnett, "chuir am beagan dhen chànan a bh' aig mo charaid troimh-a-chèile sinn..."

Why? Well, although Watts asked the questions in Gaelic, he didn't understand the answers. And, when the Gaels heard that Watts spoke Gaelic – to some degree or other – they weren't willing to speak English. They wanted to keep going in Gaelic! Those were the days!

And Garnett's conclusion? – ...we literally experienced the truth of the adage, "a little learning is a dangerous thing"!

But Garnett wasn't entirely anti-gaelic. He wrote "[that Gaelic has] a particularly expressive energy." Good on him.

Finally, here's a question for you. There is a likeness of Donald Dewar, Scotland's first First Minister, at the top end of Buchanan Street in Glasgow. But more than two hundred years ago, a memorial to somebody else was nearly erected in the same place. Who was it? I'll tell you that next week.

Carson? Uill, ged a chuir Watts na ceistean ann an Gàidhlig, cha do thuig e na freagairtean! Agus, nuair a chual na Gàidheil gun robh Gàidhlig – gu ìre air choreigin – aig Watts, cha robh iad deònach Beurla a labhairt. Bha iad ag iarraidh cumail a dol ann an Gàidhlig! B' iad sin na làithean!

Agus an co-dhùnadh aig Garnett? – ...we literally experienced the truth of the adage, "a little learning is a dangerous thing"!

Ach cha robh Garnett gu tur an aghaidh na Gàidhlig. Sgrìobh e "[that Gaelic has] a particularly expressive energy." Sin thu, a bhalaich.

Mu dheireadh, seo ceist dhuibh. Tha ìomhaigh de Dhòmhnall Mac an Deòir, a' chiad Phrìomh Mhinistear aig Alba, aig ceann shuas Sràid Bhochanain ann an Glaschu. Ach còrr is dà cheud bliadhna air ais, cha mhòr nach deach carragh-cuimhne a chur suas do chuid-eigin eile anns an aon àite. Cò bha ann? Innsidh mi dhuibh an-ath-sheachdain.