

## 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 427 (which corresponds to Litir 731). Ruairidh can be contacted at [rodny.macleon@bbc.co.uk](mailto:rodny.macleon@bbc.co.uk).

*Do you know the ceud-chasach? The centipede. According to oral tradition, a centipede inspired a Gaelic poet to write a famous poem. Who was the poet and what was the poem?*

*Here's a bit of the poem for you. This verse is about a storm at sea:*

The rage and fury of the sea, and the movement of the ship, dashing the white brains [of the sea animals] throughout every billow. Every small fish that was in the sea, white-bellied, turned upwards, with raging storm, killed in their droves.

*Do you know what poem that is? Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill by Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair. Alasdair, who lived between 1695 and 1770, was a terrific poet. Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill was one of his finest poems. It was based on a sea voyage in a birlinn between South Uist and northern Ireland.*

*Alasdair was Clanranald's factor in canna. People say that he started Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill in Canna, and that he finished it in Uist, twenty years later.*

A bheil sibh eòlach air a' cheud-chasach? An centipede. A rèir beul-aithris, thug ceud-chasach air bàrd Gàidhlig dàn ainmeil a sgrìobhadh. Cò am bàrd agus dè an dàn?

Seo beagan dhen dàn dhuibh. Tha an earrann seo mu dheidhinn stoirm aig muir:

*Anfhadh is confhadh na mara, is falbh na luinge, sradadh an eanchainnean geala feadh gach tuinne. Gach mion-iasg a bha san fhairge, tàrr-gheal tionndaidht', le gluasad confhadh na gailbhinn, marbh gun chunntas.*

A bheil fios agaibh dè an dàn a tha sin? *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill* le Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair. Bha Alasdair, a bha beò eadar sia ceud deug, naochad 's a còig (1695) agus seachd ceud deug is seachdad (1770), na bhàrd air leth. B' e Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill fear de na dàin a b' fheàrr aige. Bha e stèidhichte air turas mara ann am birlinn eadar Uibhist a Deas agus ceann a tuath na h-Èireann.

Bha Alasdair na bhàillidh aig Clann Raghnaill ann an Canaigh. Tha daoine ag ràdh gun do thòisich e Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill ann an Canaigh, agus gun do chuir e crìoch air

*According to oral tradition, the poet commenced the poem when he was lying in the dark under a boat that was upside-down on Canna. Perhaps that wasn't strange at that time. Here's what Martin Martin wrote at the end of the seventeenth century about Gaelic bards: They shut their Doors and Windows for a day's time, and lie on their backs, with a Stone upon their Belly, and Plaids about their Heads, and their Eyes being cover'd, they pump their Brains for Rhetorical Encomium or Panegyrick...*

*According to oral tradition, when Alasdair was lying under the hull of the boat, a centipede fell from a thwart. The creature was upside-down in a puddle. It was struggling with its legs. That reminded the poet of the oars of a birlinn and he started on the poem!*

*Well, that's the story, anyway! But there is something important for me about the image of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair creating poetry under a boat, as I'll explain next week.*

ann an Uibhist fichead bliadhna às dèidh sin.

A rèir beul-aithris, thòisich am bàrd air an dàn nuair a bha e na laighe anns an dorchadas fo bhata a bha bun-os-cionn ann an Canaigh. 'S dòcha nach robh sin annasach aig an àm sin. Seo na sgrìobh Màrtainn MacIlle-Mhàrtainn aig deireadh an t-seachdamh linn deug mu bhàird Ghàidhlig: *They shut their Doors and Windows for a day's time, and lie on their backs, with a Stone upon their Belly, and Plaids about their Heads, and their Eyes being cover'd, they pump their Brains for Rhetorical Encomium or Panegyrick...*

A rèir beul-aithris, nuair a bha Alasdair na làighe fo shlige a' bhàta, thuit ceud-chasach far tobhta. Bha an creutair bun-os-cionn ann an glumag. Bha e a' dèanamh spàirn le chasan. Chuir sin ràimh birlinn ann an inntinn a' bhàird, agus thòisich e air an dàn!

Uill, 's e sin an stòiridh, co-dhiù! Ach tha rudeigin cudromach dhòmhsa mu ìomhaigh Mhic Mhaighstir Alasdair a' cruthachadh bàrdachd fon bhàta, mar a mhìnichas mi an-ath-sheachdain.