

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 482 (which corresponds to Litir 786). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

Each person will have his own choice of the most beautiful glen in Scotland. The choice of the late Finlay MacRae was Glen Affric. Finlay passed away a few weeks ago. He was heavily involved in the conservation of the forest in the glen.

I heard about Finlay in the seventies when I was living in Australia. He was a Skyeman and he spoke Gaelic. I thought it would be interesting to meet him.

The opportunity came when I was working at Radio nan Gàidheal in the nineties. I wanted to make a documentary programme about the conservation of the forest in Glen Affric. Finlay agreed to be in the programme.

We met on a beautiful summer's day. Finlay took me around the glen. He explained to me how he was wanting to protect the pine forest. That was at the start of the sixties. He understood how valuable the forest was. Good on him.

What fun we had. Finlay took his dog – a large yellow labrador – with him. He opened a tin of

Bidh a roghainn fhèin aig gach duine air a' ghleann as brèagha ann an Alba. B' e roghainn Fhionnlaigh MhicRath nach maireann – Gleann Afraig. Chaochail Fionnlagh o chionn beagan sheachd-ainean. Bha e an sàs gu mòr ann an gleidheadh na coille anns a' ghleann.

Chuala mi mu Fhionnlagh anns na seachdadan nuair a bha mi a' fuireach ann an Astràilia. 'S e Sgitheanach a bha ann agus bha Gàidhlig aige. Shaoil mi gum biodh e inntinneach coinneachadh ris.

Thàinig an cothrom nuair a bha mi ag obair aig Radio nan Gàidheal sna naochadan. Bha mi airson prògram aithriseil a dhèanamh mu ghleidheadh na coille ann an Gleann Afraig. Dh'aontaich Fionnlagh a bhith anns a' phrògram.

Choinnich sinn air latha brèagha samhraidh. Thug Fionnlagh timcheall a' ghlinn mi. Mhìnich e dhomh mar a bha e ag iarraidh a' choille ghiuthais a dhìon. Bha sin aig toiseach nan seasgadan. Bha e a' tuigsinn cho prìseil 's a bha a' choille. Mo bheannachd air.

Abair an spòrs a bha againn. Thug Fionnlagh a chù – labrador mòr bàn – leis. Dh'fhosgail e tiona sardines. Thug e

sardines. He gave the dog that as food. And, for the rest of the day, we kept away from the dog. He was burping and farting. And the horrible smell of the fish was coming from him at both ends! We kept the car's windows fully open. Fortunately, it was hot and there were no midges.

Finlay took his bagpipes with him. He was a skilled player. He had written a melodious tune – 'Leaving Glen Affric'. I recorded him playing that tune, in the middle of the forest. There was something special about those few minutes with Finlay when man, music and place came together.

And language. 'The forest is like Gaelic,' said Finlay. I had the same thoughts. 'We must make an effort to preserve it, but it's worth it,' he said. 'For who are we without our forest[s]? And who are we without our language?' It was an honour for me to spend that day with Finlay MacRae in Glen Affric of the trees.

sin mar bhiadh don chù. Agus, airson a' chòrr dhen latha, chùm sinn air falbh bhon chù. Bha e a' brùchdail s a' bramadaich. Agus bha samh sgriosail an èisg a' tighinn bhuaithe aig an dà cheann dheth! Chùm sinn uinneagan a' chàir làn fhosgailte. Gu fortanach, bha i teth agus cha robh sgeul air a' mheanbh-chuileig.

Thug Fionnlagh a phìob-mhòr leis. Bha e ealanta air a' phìob. Bha e air port fonnmhor a sgrìobhadh – 'Fàgail Ghleann Afraig'. Chlàr mi e a' seinn a' phuirt sin, ann am meadhan na coille. Bha rudeigin air leth mu na beagan mhionaidean sin cuide ri Fionnlagh nuair a thàinig duine, ceòl is àite còmhla.

Agus cànan. 'Tha a' choille coltach ris a' Ghàidhlig,' thuirt Fionnlagh. Bha na dearbh smuaintean agam fhìn. 'Feumaidh sinn oidhirp a dhèanamh airson a gleidheadh ach 's fhiach e,' thuirt e. 'Oir cò sinn às aonais ar coille? Agus cò sinn às aonais ar cànan?' Bha e na urram dhomh an latha sin a chur seachad cuide ri Fionnlagh MacRath ann an Gleann Afraig nan craobh.