

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 493 (which corresponds to Litir 797). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

<p>John Anderson, my jo, John, When we were first acquent; Your locks were like the raven, Your bonnie brow was brent; But now your brow is beld, John, Your locks are like the snaw; But blessings on your frosty pow, John Anderson, my jo.</p> <p><i>Many of you will know that Robert Burns wrote that verse. Burns and John Anderson were friends. They were born in the same county – Ayrshire – in the same year – 1759.</i></p> <p><i>I was walking in the old cemetery in Fort Augustus. It's a beautiful place with views of the hills. I saw an old gravestone. There were moss and lichen on it.</i></p> <p><i>Beside it there was a small notice on which was 'John Anderson, my Jo. Friend of Robert Burns, character of one of the most touching of Burns' songs'. I looked closely at the stone itself. 'Sacred to the Memory of John Anderson,' is carved on it, 'who died at Invergarry on the 4 May 1832.'</i></p> <p><i>John was a joiner. He made Robert Burns' coffin. I don't know why he was living in the Highlands.</i></p>	<p><i>John Anderson, my jo, John, When we were first acquent; Your locks were like the raven, Your bonnie brow was brent; But now your brow is beld, John, Your locks are like the snaw; But blessings on your frosty pow, John Anderson, my jo.</i></p> <p>Bidh fios aig mòran agaibh gur e Raibeart Burns a sgrìobh an rann sin. Bha Burns agus John Anderson nan caraidean. Rugadh iad anns an aon siorrachd – Siorrachd Adhair – anns an aon bhliadhna – seachd ceud deug, caogad 's a naoi (1759).</p> <p>Bha mi a' coiseachd anns an t-seann chladh ann an Cille Chuimein. 'S e àite brèagha a tha ann le seallaidhean dhen mhonadh. Chunnaic mi seann chlach-uaiغه. Bha còinneach is crotal oirre.</p> <p>Ri a taobh bha sanas beag air an robh 'John Anderson, my Jo. Friend of Robert Burns, character of one of the most touching of Burns' songs'. Choimhead mi gu dlùth air a' chloich fhèin. Tha 'Sacred to the Memory of John Anderson,' snàighte oirre, 'who died at Invergarry on the 4 May 1832.'</p> <p>'S e saor a bha ann an John. Rinn e a' chiste-laighe aig Raibeart Burns. Chan eil mi cinnteach carson a bha e a' fuireach</p>
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But it appears that his daughter was living in Invergarry. She died six months after her father. She is named on the same gravestone.

Some scholars say that the two-verse song we have today is not its first manifestation. Burns wrote a somewhat rude song – some might call it ‘obscene’ – in which there were six verses. They were about how John was become incapable in [the] bed. But today we have a beautiful poem about love in old age.

John Anderson my jo, John,
We clamb the hill the gither;
And mony a canty day, John,
We've had wi' ane anither:
Now we maun totter down, John,
And hand in hand we'll go;
And sleep the gither at the foot,
John Anderson, my jo.

And it's in Fort Augustus that John Anderson's story ended. He sleeps at the base of the mountains.

air a' Ghàidhealtachd. Ach tha e coltach gun robh a nighean a' fuireach ann an Inbhir Garadh. Chaochail ise sia mìosan an dèidh a h-athar. Tha i air a h-ainmeachadh air an aon chloich-uaighe.

Tha cuid de sgoilearan ag ràdh nach e an dàn dà-rannach a tha againn an-diugh a' chiad dreach a bha air. Sgrìobh Burns òran car mì-mhodhail – chanadh cuid ‘drabasta’ ’s dòcha – anns an robh sia rannan. Bha iad mu dheidhinn mar a bha John a' fàs eu-comasach anns an leabaidh. Ach an-diugh tha dàn brèagha againn mu ghaol ann an seann aois.

*John Anderson my jo, John,
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We've had wi' ane anither:
Now we maun totter down, John,
And hand in hand we'll go;
And sleep the gither at the foot,
John Anderson, my jo.*

Agus 's ann ann an Cille Chuimein a thàinig sgeul John Anderson gu crìch. Tha e na chadal aig bonn nam beann.