

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 606 (which corresponds to Litir 910). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

It's senseless whales that rejected
their home
On the maritime face of the ocean
When they made course for the
bay of Ballallan
Death was their reward
It's [only] one of them that went
back to the sea,
The others were stoned
mercilessly
The local lads were in droves
flaying
Till early on Monday morning.

Do you recognise that song? It's about the hunting of whales. It happened in Lewis in 1934.

People would protect the whales today. But, at that time, matters were different. People were poor. When whales appeared in front of their houses, that was 'the will of providence'.

It's just one whale that returned to sea. 'The others were stoned mercilessly'. There were 54 of them. Apparently, they were northern bottlenose whales.

They appeared in Loch Erisort

*'S e mucan gun chiall chuir cùl rin
dachaigh
Air aodann mharail a' chuain;
Nuair chuir iad an cùrs air bàgh
Bhail' Ailein
'S e 'm bàs a bh' aca mar dhuais;
'S e aon a thàr gu sàl air ais
dhiubh,
Chaidh càch a chlachadh gun
truas;
Bha balaich an àite nam màl a'
feannadh
Gu tràth air madainn Diluain.*

A bheil sibh ag aithneachadh an òrain sin? Tha e mu dheidhinn sealg mhucan-mara. Thachair e ann an Leòdhas ann an naoi ceud deug, trithead 's a ceithir (1934).

Bhiodh daoine a' dìon nam muc an-diugh. Ach, aig an àm sin, bha gnothaichean eadar-dhealaichte. Bha daoine bochd. Nuair a nochdadh mucan-mara air beulaibh nan taighean aca, b' e sin 'rùn an fhreastail'.

'S e dìreach aon mhuc-mhara a thill gu muir. 'Chaidh càch a chlachadh gun truas'. Bha caogad 's a ceithir ann dhiubh. A rèir choltais, 's e mucan-biorach tuathach a bha annta – northern bottlenose whales.

Nochd iad ann an Loch Eireasort

near Habost. Some people went out in small boats. They followed the whales to Balallan. They drove the animals into the shallow water at the head of the loch. They killed them there. They boiled the blubber in large pots to extract oil. A terrible smell emanated from them. Here is the third verse:

On Tuesday morning, there was a terrible smell
High to the mountain tops
The deer themselves detected the bad smell
That was rising out of the glen
They made off with a leap and a sigh
It's only compulsion that would keep them there
They wouldn't eat any of the grass until they reached the hills of Hushinish [in Harris].

The person who wrote the song was of the opinion that the people there weren't seafarers or fishermen. They were 'lads of the tweed' [weavers]. Usually, fish or sea creatures were not in danger from them. But this time it was different. I believe that was the last time that people were involved in a whale hunt in Scotland.

faisg air Tàbost. Chaidh feadhainn a-mach ann an eathraichean. Lean iad na mucan gu ruige Bail' Ailein. Dh'iomain iad na beathaichean chun an uisge eu-domhainn aig ceann an locha. Mharbh iad an sin iad. Ghoil iad an t-saill ann am praisean airson ola fhaighin. Bha fàileadh mòr a' tighinn asta. Seo an treas rann:

*Sa mhadainn Dimàirt bha fàileadh damait
Gu h-àrd air mullach nam beann;
Gun d' fhairich na fèidh iad fhèin an samh
A bha 'g èirigh mach às a' ghleann;
Tharraing iad ceum le leum is osann,
'S e 'n èiginn a chumadh iad ann,
Chan itheadh iad beum dhen fheur gun ruigeadh
Iad slèibhtean Hùisinis thall.*

Bha an neach a sgrìobh an t-òran dhen bheachd nach e maraichean no iasgairean a bha anns na daoine an sin. 'S e 'balaich a' chlà' a bha annta. Mar bu trice cha robh èisg no creutairean mara ann an cunnart bhuapa. Ach, an turas seo, bha a' chùis eadar-dhealaichte. Tha mi a' creidsinn gum b' e sin an turas mu dheireadh a bha daoine a' sealg mhucan-mara ann an Alba.