

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 628 (which corresponds to Litir 932). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.macleon@bbc.co.uk.

I was telling you that the word siùcar [sugar] doesn't appear in the Gaelic Bible. Or, if it does, I don't know about it. But there are one or two accounts of a' chuile chùbhraidh, 'the sweet-smelling cane'. That is translated as 'sweet cane', however. Is that sugar cane? Cùbhraidh describes smell rather than taste. Some scholars think that it was an Indian cane from which ola ungaidh came. Anointing oil. Ola ungaidh.

If sugar wasn't known at the time of the writing of the Bible, was there a word for sweet? Well, yes, and here it is in the Book of Job, Chapter 20: Although evil is sweet in his mouth, and he hides it under his tongue. That's the word for sweet – milis. It's based on mil 'honey'. People weren't familiar with sugar in olden times, but they were familiar with honey. And the taste of honey.

Although it is mil that is in the Gaelic dictionaries for honey, it's mel that my late father would say. He spoke Applecross Gaelic and he would say mel for 'honey' and meilis for 'sweet'. It's mel in Latin. People think that it's from Latin that the word came into Gaelic.

Bha mi ag innse dhuibh nach eil am facal siùcar a' nochdadh anns a' Bhìoball Ghàidhlig. No ma thà, chan aithne dhomh e. Ach tha iomradh no dhà ann air a' chuile chùbhraidh 'the sweet-smelling cane'. Thathar ag eadar-theangachadh sin, ge-tà, mar sweet cane. An e sin cuile an t-siùcair? Tha cùbhraidh a' dèanamh tuairisgeul air fàileadh seach blas. Tha cuid de sgoilearan dhen bheachd gur e cuile Innseanach a bha ann às an tàinig ola ungaidh. Anointing oil. Ola ungaidh.

Mura robh siùcar aithnichte ri linn sgrìobhadh a' Bhìobaill, an robh facal ann airson sweet? Uill bha, agus seo e ann an Leabhar Iob, Caibideil 20: Ged a tha an t-olc milis na bheul, agus e ga fhalach fo a theangaidh ... Sin agaibh am facal airson sweet – milis. Tha e stèidhichte air mil 'honey'. Cha robh daoine eòlach air siùcar anns an t-seann aimsir, ach bha iad eòlach air mil. Agus air blas na meala.

Ged as e mil a tha anns na faclairan Gàidhlig airson honey, 's e mel a chanadh m' athair nach maireann. 'S e Gàidhlig na Comraich a bha aige agus chanadh esan mel airson 'honey' agus meilis airson 'sweet'. 'S e mel a tha ann ann an Laideann. Tha daoine a' smaoinachadh gur ann bhon Laidinn a

And here it is in the Bible in Revelation, Chapter 10, Verse 10: And I took the small book out of the angel's hand and ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey In English: I took the small book out of the angel's hand and ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey ...

The word mil – and the adjective milis – often appear in the Gaelic Bible. And the same is true of Gaelic poetry. In the poem by Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair – Allt an t-Siùcair – the word milis appears several times. 'Sugary' does not appear at all. 'The taste of honey' is nicer than 'the taste of sugar', isn't it?!

thàinig am facal a-steach don Ghàidhlig.

Agus seo e anns a' Bhioball ann an Taisbeanadh Eòin, Caibideil 10, Rann 10: *Agus ghlac mi an leabhran à làimh an aingil, agus dh'ith mi suas e; agus bha e nam bheul milis mar mhil ...* Ann am Beurla: *And I took the small book out of the angel's hand and ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey ...*

Tha am facal *mil* – agus am buadhair *milis* – a' nochdadh gu tric anns a' Bhioball Ghàidhlig. Agus tha an aon rud fìor mu bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig. Anns an dàn le Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair – Allt an t-Siùcair – tha am facal *milis* ann grunn tursan. Chan eil *siùcrach* no *siùcaireach* a' nochdadh idir. Tha 'blas na meala' nas snoige na 'blas an t-siùcair', nach eil?!