

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 685 (which corresponds to Litir 989). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

I was telling you about the 'Colby Camps' – buildings that the Ordnance Survey folk built when they were surveying the Highlands. They were named after Thomas Colby, a famous geographer.

Colby was born in 1784. He was raised in England and South Wales. He proved at a young age that he was particularly capable at mapping work. However, he had a terrible accident at the age of nineteen. He was mucking around with a gun when it exploded in his left hand. He lost his hand. And there was a piece of metal in his skull for the rest of his life.

Surveying was difficult for a man who had lost a hand but Colby managed. In 1820, he obtained work as the head of the Ordnance Survey. Four years after that, the government chose to make a big survey of Ireland. The maps that Colby made in Ireland are extremely important. They show the makeup of the country before the Great Famine.

Colby was also in Scotland. He won a reputation for himself in the Highlands for standing up to

Bha mi ag innse dhuibh mu na 'Colby Camps' – togalaichean a thog muinntir na Suirbhidh Òrdanais nuair a bha iad a' suirbhidheadh na Gàidhealtachd. Bha iad air an ainmeachadh an dèidh Tòmas Colby, cruinn-eòlaiche ainmeil.

Rugadh Colby ann an seachd ceud deug, ochdad 's a ceithir (1784). Thogadh e ann an Sasainn agus ceann a deas na Cuimrigh. Dhearbh e aig aois òg gun robh e fìor chomasach air obair mhapaichean. Ge-tà, bha tubaist mhòr aige aig aois naoi-deug. Bha e a' gabhail spòrs le gunna nuair a spreadh e na làimh chli. Chaill e a làmh. Agus bha pìos meatailt na chlaigeann airson a' chòrr de a bheatha.

Bha suirbhidheadh doirbh do dhuine a bha gann de làimh ach rinn Colby a' chùis. Ann an ochd ceud deug is fichead (1820), fhuair e obair mar cheannard na Suirbhidh Òrdanais. Ceithir bliadhna an dèidh sin, roghnaich an riaghaltas suirbhidh mhòr a dhèanamh de dh'Èirinn. Tha na mapaichean a rinn Colby ann an Èirinn air leth cudromach. Tha iad a' sealltainn cruth na dùthcha ron Ghoirt Mhòir.

Bha Colby ann an Alba cuideachd. Choisinn e cliù dha fhèin air a' Ghàidhealtachd airson a bhith a' seasamh

hardship and bad weather. He and his team of staff spent weeks on the summit of Ben Nevis.

Colby was as fit as a fiddle – and he was expecting his companions to be just as capable as himself. They would commonly be walking thirty nine miles each day.

He would be looking for a church on a Sunday. But one time in Lochaber there was no sign of a church. Colby asked his workers to spend their day ‘off’ by climbing the Aonach Beag near Ben Nevis. It had an altitude of four thousand feet!

But there was one summit that was too difficult for him. That was the Stac – or Inaccessible Pinnacle – at the top of the Cuillin on Skye. Colby attempted to climb it. But, with just one hand and no rope or ladder, he didn’t succeed.

ri cruadal is droch shìde. Chuir e fhèin is sgioba de luchd-obrach seachad seachdainean air mullach Beinn Nibheis.

Bha Colby cho fut ri fiadh – agus bha e an dùil gum biodh a chompanaich a cheart cho comasach ris fhèin. Bhiodh iad a’ coiseachd anns a’ choitcheannas trithead ’s a naoi mìle gach latha.

Bhiodh e a’ coimhead airson eaglais air Didòmhnaich. Ach aon turas ann an Loch Abar cha robh sgeul air eaglais. Dh’iarr Colby air an luchd-obrach aige an latha ‘dhet’ aca a chur seachad ann a bhith a’ dìreadh an Aonaich Bhig faisg air Beinn Nibheis. Bha àirde ann de chòrr is ceithir mìle troigh!

Ach bha aon mhullach a bha ro dhoirbh dha. B’ e sin An Stac – no am Bidean Do-ruigsinneach – air mullach a’ Chuilthinn anns an Eilean Sgitheanach. Rinn Colby oidhirp air a shreap. Ach, le dìreach aon làmh agus gun ròp no àradh, cha deach leis.