

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 725 (which corresponds to Litir 1,029). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.macleon@bbc.co.uk.

I was speaking last week about the cuckoo. She comes to Scotland every year. But, in olden times, she wasn't going to St Kilda too often, at least according to the Skyeman, Martin Martin. He has an account of the cuckoo on St Kilda in his book A Late Voyage to St Kilda. He was there more than three hundred years ago.

'The cuckoo is rarely seen here,' wrote Martin. 'And that upon extraordinary occasions, such as the death of the proprietor MacLeod [of MacLeod], or the arrival of some notable stranger.' Martin laughed when he heard that oral tradition. He told the local people it was without reason. But the island's steward confirmed that their information was correct. In his own day and his father's, he said, the people of the island saw the cuckoo after the death of the two last landlords, and shortly before a stranger arrived in St Kilda.

You'll have a question, I'm sure. Did the cuckoo appear in St Kilda shortly before Martin himself appeared there?! Well, yes,

Bha mi a' bruidhinn an t-seachdain sa chaidh mun chuthaig. Bidh i a' tighinn a dh'Alba gach bliadhna. Ach, anns an t-seann aimsir, cha robh i a' dol gu Hiort ro thrì, co-dhiù a rèir an Sgitheanaich, Màrtainn MacIlleMhàrtainn. Tha cunntas aige dhen chuthaig ann an Hiort anns an leabhar aige *A Late Voyage to St Kilda*. Bha e ann o chionn còrr is trì cheud bliadhna.

'S ann ainneamh a bhios a' chuthag ri a faicinn an seo,' sgrìobh MacIlleMhàrtainn. 'Agus sin ann an co-cheangal ri tachartasan àraidh, mar eisimpleir bàs an uachdarain, MacLeòid [Dhùn Bheagain], no nuair a nochdas coigreach cliùmhor.' Rinn MacIlleMhàrtainn gàire nuair a chuala e am beul-aithris sin. Thuir e ri muinntir an àite gun robh e gun reusan. Ach dhearbhaibh bàillidh an eilein gun robh am fiosrachadh aca ceart. Ri a linn fhèin agus ri linn athar, thuir e, chunnaic muinntir an eilein a' chuthag an dèidh bàs na dithis uachdaran mu dheireadh, agus goirid mus do nochd coigreach ann an Hiort.

Bidh ceist agaibh, tha fhios. An do nochd a' chuthag ann an Hiort goirid mus do nochd MacIlleMhàrtainn fhèin ann?! Uill, nochd, a rèir muinntir an àite.

according to the local people. The St Kildans were certain that Martin himself was responsible for it. There was a minister with him, but he was in St Kilda before. Thus, he was not a stranger.

There is oral tradition on Skye that adds to this story. It was said, when there was a population on St Kilda, that something strange was happening every time a MacLeod clan chief died. If it happened in summer, all of the cuckoos around Dunvegan Castle were fleeing. They were going to St Kilda.

They went there to tell the people of St Kilda that their landlord was dead. It is said, one particular year, that a boat went from Dunvegan to St Kilda to tell the people that their clan chief was dead. But, when the Skyemen reached the island, the St Kildans were already lamenting his death. They knew about it. The cuckoos had told them!

Bha na Hiortaich deimhinne gur e Màrtainn fhèin a bu choireach ris. Bha ministear còmhla ris, ach bha esan ann an Hiort roimhe. Mar sin, chan e coigreach a bha ann.

Tha beul-aithris anns an Eilean Sgitheanach a tha a' cur ris an sgeul seo. Bhathar ag ràdh, nuair a bha slugh ann an Hiort, gun robh rudeigin annasach a' tachairt gach turas a bha ceann-cinnidh nan Leòdach a' faighinn bàs. Nan tachradh e as t-samhradh, bhiodh na cuthagan gu lèir timcheall Caisteal Dhùn Bheagain a' teicheadh. Bha iad a' falbh a Hiort.

Chaidh iad ann airson innse do mhuinntir Hiort gun robh an uachdaran marbh. Thathar ag ràdh, bliadhna a bha seo, gun deach bàta à Dùn Bheagain a Hiort airson innse do na daoine gun robh an ceann-cinnidh marbh. Ach, nuair a ràinig na Sgitheanaich an t-eilean, bha na Hiortaich a' caoidh a bhàis mu-thràth. Bha fios aca mu dheidhinn. Bha na cuthagan air innse dhaibh!