

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 833 (which corresponds to Litir 1,137). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.macleam@bbc.co.uk.

The welcome of Beltane upon you. The first day of May is Beltane Day. It's a pity that we abandoned many of our ceremonies connected to Beltane. Here's what Edward Dwelly wrote about the festival in his dictionary:

'On the first of May was held a great druidical festival in favour of the god Belus. On this day fires were kindled on the mountain tops for the purposes of sacrifice and between these fires the cattle were driven, to preserve them from contagion ...'

Dwelly tells us that people were extinguishing their hearth-fires. Then they were lighting a new fire. For that, they were using flames from the Beltane fire.

Young people were meeting on the moors on the first of May. They were making a sort of table by digging a ditch in a round shape. Here is the next piece of Dwelly's account.

'They kindled a fire and dressed a repast of eggs and milk of the consistency of custard. They

Fàilte na Bealltainn oirbh. 'S e a' chiad latha dhen Chèitean Latha na Bealltainn. Tha e duilich gun do leig sinn seachad mòran de na deas-ghnàthan againn co-cheangailte ris a' Bhealltainn. Seo na sgrìobh Eideard Dwelly mu dheidhinn na fèille anns an fhaclair aige:

'Air a' chiad latha dhen Chèitean, bhathar a' cumail fèill mhòr dhraoidheil mar chomharra dhen dia Belus. Air an latha seo, bhathar a' losgadh theintean air mullaichean nam beann air adhbhar ìobairt agus eadar na teintean seo bhathar ag iomain crodh mar dhòigh gus an dìon bho ghalar ...'

Tha Dwelly ag innse dhuinn gun robh daoine a' mùchadh nan teintean aca a-staigh. An uair sin bha iad a' cur teine ùr thuige. Airson sin, bha iad a' cleachdadh lasairean bho theine Bealltainn.

Bha feadhainn òga a' coinneachadh anns a' mhonadh air a' chiad latha dhen Chèitean. Bha iad a' cruthachadh nàdar de bhòrd às an talamh le bhith a' cladhach dìg ann an cumadh cruinn. Seo an ath phìos de chunntas Dwelly:

'Chuir iad teine thuige agus rinn iad biadh le uighean agus bainne a bha car coltach ri ughagan. Rinn iad bonnach

kneaded a cake of oatmeal, which was toasted at the embers ... After the custard was eaten, they divided the cake into as many portions as there were persons in the company, as much alike as possible in size.'

But then they were doing something strange. Do you know the word gual-fiodha? That's the Gaelic for 'charcoal'. The people were rubbing one piece of the cake with charcoal. Then it was as black as the bottom of a pot. They put all the pieces of cake in a hat.

Everybody had a blindfold on. They were drawing out a piece of the cake. The person that chose the black piece was the 'sacrifice' for the god Baal. They were wanting the land to be fertile in the year ahead [of them].

That doesn't mean that they were killing a person as a sacrifice! This person was jumping over the flames three times.

coirce, a bhiodh air a ròstadh le teas nan èibhleagan. An dèidh dhaibh an ughag ithe, roinn iad am bonnach a rèir na bha ann de dhaoine, agus a h-uile pìos dheth co-ionann ann am meud.'

Ach, an uair sin, bha iad a' dèanamh rudeigin annasach. A bheil sibh eòlach air an fhacal *gual-fiodha*? Sin a' Ghàidhlig a tha air *charcoal*. Bha na daoine a' suathadh aon pìos dhen bhonnach le *gual-fiodha*. Bha e an uair sin cho dubh ri tòn poite. Chuir iad a h-uile pìos dhen bhonnach ann am bonaid.

Bha dall-bhrat air a h-uile duine. Bha iad a' tarraing a-mach pìos dhen bhonnach. B' e an duine a thagh am pìos dubh an 'ìobairt' don dia Belus. Bha iad ag iarraidh gum biodh am fearann torach anns a' bhliadhna romhpa.

Chan eil sin a' ciallachadh gun robh iad a' marbhadh cuideigin mar ìobairt! Bha an duine seo a' leum thairis air na lasairean trì tursan.