

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 987 (which corresponds to Litir 1,291). Ruairidh can be contacted at fios@learngaelic.scot.

If you have been to a course or event at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig – the 'Gaelic College on Skye – perhaps you will know Loch nan Dùbhrachan. It's next to the main Sleat road, the A851, at the end of the minor road that leads to Ord.

The Ordnance Survey reckons that Loch nan Dùbhrachan perhaps means 'the loch of dimness ... or gloom'. Locally, people say that it means 'the loch of the spirits'. The name is accompanied by an old story.

I'm going to tell you how M.E.M. Donaldson – Mary Ethel Muir Donaldson – reported the story in her book 'Wandering in the Western Highlands and Islands'. It was published a century ago. She says that local people thought that a water-horse [or kelpie] was living in the loch.

She had a conversation with an elderly man. He told her that he was [had been] involved, fifty years previously, in an effort to catch the water-horse of Loch nan Dùbhrachan. Although people called it a 'water-horse', it was more like a cow with a long mane. And it would

Ma tha sibh air a dhol gu cùrsa no tachartas aig Sabhal Mòr Ostaig – 'Colaiste na Gàidhlig' anns an Eilean Sgitheanach – math dh'fhaodte gum bi sibh eòlach air Loch nan Dùbhrachan. Tha e ri taobh rathad mòr Shlèite, an A851, aig ceann an rathaid bhig a tha a' dol gu ruige An t-Òrd.

Tha an t-Suirbhidh Òrdanais a' cumail a-mach gu bheil Loch nan Dùbhrachan math dh'fhaodte a' ciallachadh 'the loch of dimness or ... gloom'. Gu h-ionadail, tha daoine ag ràdh gu bheil e a' ciallachadh 'the loch of the spirits'. Tha an t-ainm a' dol le seann sgeul.

Tha mi a' dol a dh'innse dhuibh mar a dh'aithris M.E.M. Donaldson – Mary Ethel Muir Donaldson – an sgeul anns an leabhar aice 'Wandering in the Western Highlands and Islands'. Chaidh fhoillseachadh o chionn ceud bliadhna. Tha i ag ràdh gun robh muinntir an àite dhen bheachd gun robh each-uisge a' fuireach anns an loch.

Bha còmhradh aice le seann duine. Dh'innse e dhi gun robh e an sàs, leth-cheud bliadhna roimhe, ann an oidhirp each-uisge Loch nan Dùbhrachan a ghlacadh. Ged as e 'each-uisge' a chanadh daoine ris, bha e na bu choltaiche ri bò le muing fhada. Agus bhiodh e a' dèanamh lorgan-coise a bha ann an cumadh botal-fiona.

make footprints in the form of a wine bottle.

When the day came to catch the water-horse, it was like a holiday. The pupils didn't go to school. A large number of people came to Loch nan Dùbhrachan. Plenty of them were taking drams [whisky].

There were two small boats on the loch. A net was stretched between them. It was caught by something on the bottom [of the loch] – an old tree or stone. But some folk thought the water-horse was tangled in it. They fled in fear!

When the work was done, there was nothing in the net but two pike [fish]. Thus, did the author – M.E.M. Donaldson reckon that there was no such creature in Loch nan Dùbhrachan? No! She reckoned that they failed to catch the water-horse but that it was still alive in the loch!

Nuair a thàinig an latha airson an t-each-uisge a ghlacadh, bha e mar latha-fèille. Cha deach na sgoilearan don sgoil. Thàinig sluagh mòr gu ruige Loch nan Dùbhrachan. Bha gu leòr dhiubh a' gabhail dhramaichean.

Bha dà bhàta bheag air an loch. Bha lìon air a shìneadh eatarra. Chaidh a ghlacadh le rudeigin air a' ghrunnd – seann chraobh no clach. Ach bha cuid de na daoine a' smaoinichadh gun robh an t-each-uisge an sàs ann! Theich iad, agus an t-eagal orra!

Nuair a bha an obair seachad, cha robh dad anns an lìon ach dà gheadas. Mar sin, an robh an t-ùghdar – M.E.M. Donaldson – dhen bheachd nach robh creutair dhen t-seòrsa sin ann an Loch nan Dùbhrachan? Cha robh! Bha i dhen bheachd gun do dh'fhàilnich orra an t-each-uisge a ghlacadh ach gun robh e fhathast beò anns an loch!