

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 1,069 (which corresponds to Litir 1,373). Ruairidh can be contacted at fios@learngaelic.scot.

I was one time with my late father-in-law. We were in Victoria in the south-east of Australia, in an area where mining once took place. My father-in-law was born and raised in Victoria.

There were mounds of ground/soil throughout the area. Some of them were as big as a house. But they were not natural. They were made by people.

My father-in-law had a name for them – 'mullock heap'. When I heard that, I thought of Gaelic. I wonder what language mullock – M-U-L-L-O-C-K – came from. There are somewhat similar words in Gaelic, aren't there?

One English language dictionary says mullock – 'Australian – waste material from a mine'. Perhaps, then it is the material itself that mullock means, rather than the mounds of them.

The dictionaries tell us that it was from Middle English that it came into modern English. The word is related to the old word mul – M-U-L – which meant 'dust, mould, rubbish'.

However, there were plenty of people from Scotland and Ireland involved in gold mining in Australia in the 19th century. And this is in Gaelic dictionaries: mul 'a conical heap';

Bha mi turas còmhla ri m' athair-chèile nach maireann. Bha sinn ann am Bhictoria ann an ceann an earra-dheas Astràilia, ann an sgìre far an robh mèinnearachd a' dol uaireigin. Rugadh agus thogadh m' athair-chèile ann am Bhictoria.

Bha cnapan talmhainn air feadh an àite. Bha feadhainn aca cho mòr ri taigh. Ach cha robh iad nàdarrach. Bha iad air an dèanamh le daoine.

Bha ainm aig m' athair-chèile air an son – mullock heap. Nuair a chuala mi sin, smaoinich mi air a' Ghàidhlig. Saoil dè an cànan às an tàinig mullock – M-U-L-L-O-C-K? Tha faclan car coltach ann an Gàidhlig, nach eil?

Tha aon fhaclair Beurla ag ràdh: mullock – 'Australian – waste material from a mine'. Saoil, ma-thà, an e an stuth fhèin a tha mullock a' ciallachadh, seach na cnapan dheth?

Tha na faclairean ag innse dhuinn gur ann bhon Bheurla Mheadhanaich a thàinig e a-steach do Bheurla an latha an-diugh. Tha am facal càirdeach don t-seann fhacal mul – M-U-L – a bha a' ciallachadh 'dust, mould, rubbish'.

Ge-tà, bha gu leòr de dhaoine à Alba agus Èirinn ri mèinnearachd òir ann an Astràilia anns an naoidheamh linn deug. Agus tha seo ann am faclairean Gàidhlig: mul 'a conical heap'; mulachan 'small

mulachan ‘small heap’; mulag ‘small mound, heap, pile’. They are pretty much the same in Irish Gaelic. <i>Thus, perhaps the English were seeing mullock – ‘useless rubbish’ – and the Scots and Irish were seeing mulagan (‘heaps’) which were made of that material.</i> <i>What brought this to mind was that I was reading the book A Hundred Years in the Highlands by Osgood MacKenzie. Osgood spoke Gaelic and he tells us that he saw a horse lying on a ‘mulcan (hillock)’.</i> <i>I had a conversation one time with the late Roy Wentworth from Gairloch. He was telling me about a place-name near Beinn Eighe – Na Mulcanan. There are hillocks there that were left by the ice thousands of years ago. When you are among them, they are rather like mullock heaps in Australia!</i>	<i>heap’; mulag ‘small mound, heap, pile’.</i> Tha iad an ìre mhath co-ionann ann an Gàidhlig na h-Èireann. Mar sin, math dh’fhaodte gun robh na Sasannaich a’ faicinn <i>mullock</i> – ‘stuth gun fheum’ – agus gun robh na h-Albannaich ’s na h-Èireannaich a’ faicinn <i>mulagan</i> air an dèanamh dhen stuth sin. ’S e a thug an gnothach seo gu m’aire gun robh mi a’ leughadh an leabhair <i>A Hundred Years in the Highlands</i> le Osgood MacCoinnich. Bha Gàidhlig aig Osgood agus tha e ag innse dhuinn gum fac’ e each na laighe air ‘<i>mulcan (hillock)</i>’. Bha còmhraidh agam turas le Roy Wentworth nach maireann – sgoilear na Gàidhlig à Geàrrloch. Bha e ag innse dhomh mu ainm-àite faisg air Beinn Eighe – <i>Na Mulcanan</i>. Tha mulcanan an sin a chaidh fhàgail leis an deigh o chionn mìltean bhliadhnaichean. Nuair a tha thu nam measg, tha iad car coltach ri <i>mullock heaps</i> ann an Astràilia!
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