

# AN LEABHAR MÒR

THE GREAT BOOK of GAELIC



## The Scholar and his Cat

7

*Údar / Author:*  
Gan ainm / Anon  
c.900

*Ealaíontóir / Artist:*  
Simon Fraser

*Peannaire / Calligrapher:*  
Frances Breen

*Aistritheoir / Translator:*  
1. Gerard Murphy  
2. Robin Flower



## The Scholar and his Cat

*Ancient Irish*

Messe ocus Pangur bán,  
cechtar nathar fria shaindán:  
bíth a menmasam fri seilgg,  
mu menma céin im shaincheird.

Caraimse fos, ferr cach clú,  
oc mu lebrán, léir ingnu;  
ní foirmtech frimm Pangur bán:  
caraid cesin a macdán.

Ó ru biam, scél cen scís,  
innar tegdais, ar n-óendís,  
táithiunn, díchríchide clius,  
ní fris tarddam ar n-áthius.

Gnáth, húaraib, ar gressaib gal  
glenaid luch inna línsam;  
os mé, du-fuit im lín chéin  
dliged ndoraid cu ndronchéill.

Fúachaidsem fri frega fál  
a rosc, a nglése comlán;  
fúachimm chéin fri fégi fis  
mu rosc réil, cesu imdis.

Fáelidsem cu ndéne dul  
hi nglen luch inna géchrub;  
hi tucu cheist ndoraid ndil  
os mé chene am fáelid.

Cia beimmi a-min nach ré  
ní derban cách a chéle:  
maith la cechtar nár a dán;  
subaigthus a óenurán.



Simon Fraser & Meesh

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## The Scholar and his Cat Translation 1. by Gerard Murphy

I and white Pangur  
practise each of us his special art:  
his mind is set on hunting,  
my mind on my special craft.

I love (it is better than all fame)  
to be quiet beside my book, diligently pursuing knowledge.  
White Pangur does not envy me:  
he loves his childish craft.

When the two of us (this tale never wearies us)  
are alone together in our house,  
we have something to which we may apply our skill,  
an endless sport.

It is usual, at times, for a mouse to stick in his net,  
as a result of warlike battlings.  
For my part, into my net falls  
some difficult rule of hard meaning.

He directs his bright perfect eye  
against an enclosing wall.  
Though my clear eye is very weak  
I direct it against keenness of knowledge.

He is joyful with swift movement  
when a mouse sticks in his sharp paw.  
I too am joyful when I understand  
a dearly loved difficult problem.

Though we be thus at any time,  
neither of us hinders the other:  
each of us likes his craft,  
severally rejoicing in them.

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## The Scholar and his Cat Translation 2. by Robin Flower

I and Pangur Ban my cat,  
'Tis a like task we are at:  
Hunting mice is his delight,  
Hunting words I sit all night.

Better far than praise of men  
'Tis to sit with book and pen;  
Pangur bears me no ill-will,  
He too plies his simple skill.

'Tis a merry task to see  
At our tasks how glad are we,  
When at home we sit and find  
Entertainment to our mind.

Oftentimes a mouse will stray  
In the hero Pangur's way;  
Oftentimes my keen thought set  
Takes a meaning in its net.

'Gainst the wall he sets his eye  
Full and fierce and sharp and sly;  
'Gainst the wall of knowledge I  
All my little wisdom try.

When a mouse darts from its den,  
O how glad is Pangur then!  
O what gladness do I prove  
When I solve the doubts I love!

So in peace our task we ply,  
Pangur Ban, my cat, and I;  
In our arts we find our bliss,  
I have mine and he has his.

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## THE AUTHOR & THE POEM

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*The Scholar and His Cat* is a charming poem about a scholarly Gaelic-speaking monk (either Irish or Scottish) and his lively, intelligent companion – a cat called White Pangur. The Mediaeval monks and scholars were great travellers, and it seems their cats were too! For Pangur is a P-Celtic (Welsh or Breton) name, meaning “a fuller”: someone whose job was to “full” or thicken cloth. That makes me think that perhaps the Gaelic scholar may have travelled through Brittany on his way to Austria, and picked the cat up there.

The poem is not an official part of the manuscript, however. It was noted down in the margin of a page, as if the scholar had started writing poetry to amuse himself instead of getting on with his work. Nor is Pangur Bàn the only cat to stray into the margin of a manuscript in this way. One monk, who was just about to leave Ireland, wrote “Methinks I shall take my little cat with me.” And another wrote wistfully: “My white cat has gone missing.” Many of the scholarly monks lived and worked in complete solitude. No wonder their pets were so important to them.

Although we have no other details about the poem or its author, I feel that I know the scholar quite well, and White Pangur too. They live alone, but they are not at all lonely. Indeed, they sound very happy together. They are both busy, each absorbed in the work he likes best. The cat chases mice in the walls of the house and wrestles with rats; the scholar chases the meaning of words in his books, and wrestles with the rules of astronomy.

It was another kind, happy man who chose the poem for us – the Irish poet **Seamas Heaney**, who is one of the most famous living poets. Seamas Heaney was born in County Derry in Northern Ireland. He began writing poetry when he was working in an Education College in Belfast, and he has been writing ever since. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995 – the highest accolade for any poet – for poetry “of beauty and depth, full of everyday miracles and the living past.”

One of Seamas Heaney’s own poems tells the story of another monk, St Kevin, who was kneeling at prayer one day beside an open window.

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It was spring-time, and the window was wide open. As the monk prayed he opened his arms wide in supplication, and one hand reached right out through the window. Along came a robin, who made her nest in his outstretched hand. The Saint remained where he was on his knees, with his hand outside the window, without moving – all through the summer, until the chicks had hatched and flown away.

*The Scholar and his Cat* reminds me of yet another tale about an Irish monk, St Molua, and his three animal friends. You, or your teacher, can read this story in **2 - Historical Background** on the CD-rom. Search in the section called **1. Irish-Scottish Connections**.

Translating poems from another language is always very difficult. In its original Irish this little poem is very rhythmical and full of rhymes both at the end of lines and within the lines themselves. I have included two very different translations for you to read and compare. The first is what we call a “literal” translation. That means that it tries to show the meanings of all the words, sticking as closely as possible to the original Gaelic. The second translation was written about sixty years ago and, though some of its language is a bit old-fashioned, it is closer to the original in terms of the humorous spirit of the poem, with its lively and rhythms and rhymes.



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## THE ARTIST

**Simon Fraser** was born in Inverness in 1950, and graduated from Grays, Aberdeen in 1973. As an artist (painting and printmaking) he has exhibited widely all over the world, including Sarajevo, Paris, London and Chicago. Collections of his work are in art galleries throughout Britain. He now produces books for publishers, and designs for CD-rom and the web.

Simon works from home. He lives in a house with four children aged from 17 down to 8 months old, plus a 13-year old cat. He is so busy “practising his special art” that, he tells me, he sometimes forgets to change his clothes for weeks on end. “The familiarity of wearing something indefinitely, even if smelly, is great by me,” he says. (I suspect Simon probably has a wife or partner too, but he forgot to mention her to me. Or perhaps she has run away from his smelly socks!)

However his cat is called Meesh. “At least I think that’s how she likes her name spelt,” Simon says, adding “the name means *apricot* in Arabic”. Which he admits is a rather odd name for a black cat with a white chest and whiskers! (In fact she’s named after a ginger cat called Mish whom Simon once knew “who used to sit for very many hours in the French sunshine...” I suppose that makes it all right, then. While we’re on the same subject, take another look at Simon’s portrait of a “white cat”...!)

Simon found working with **Frances Breen**, the calligrapher, a great experience, though sadly they only communicated via phone and post, due to the geographical distances involved. For Frances lives in Austria, not far from the monastery where the original Irish manuscript was found. In fact she went and took a look at the manuscript before starting on this artwork. Simon finds Frances very creative in her work: “As the painter Bonnard said of himself, she ‘embellishes’ to a degree where the picture (or in Frances’ case the word) transforms into some place that is both itself and yet also somewhere else altogether. It turns on a light of connection to those other worlds.”

Simon and the poet **Aonghas Dubh MacNeacail** (cf. *na thàinig anns a’ churach ud*) have just completed picture-poems for the 18 letters of the Gaelic tree alphabet. You can see it at [www.simonfraser.co.uk/gaelic.htm](http://www.simonfraser.co.uk/gaelic.htm).



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## THE ARTWORK

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Though Simon Fraser didn't know this poem previously, he liked it straight away. It reminded him of the Orkney poet **George Mackay Brown**, and a book they did together called *Letters to Gypsy*. Gypsy was a black cat to whom George wrote every week for many years. *The Scholar and his Cat* has the same sense of delight and the same way of speaking, one animal to another, in language which is full of respect for the other's way of life. Simon thinks this may be a specially 'Celtic' thing. He also finds *The Scholar and his Cat* a very funny poem: "a man rabbiting on to a cat".

Because the language of the poem seemed to Simon to have a quality of chanting about it, he decided to give his picture a ritualised structure. The cat is the same size as the monk. They both have a puppet-like rigidity to suggest the state of prayer or questioning – and hence the word 'why' is repeated in different ways.

Pangur's scribe is struggling with the technical complexities of his work, and in the same way Simon has to struggle with the complexities of his computer! Fascinating, infuriating by turns as computers are, the real work of the artist, just as for the poet, is really not the medium (reed pens, clogging inks, computer misbehaviours etc.) but the internal wrestling to express ideas.

When asked about who his "major artistic influences" were, he replied, "I love children's picture-books because they bring word and image close. So do drama and film, but the poring over something in one's own time and turning it over in the imagination belongs to books and art especially. Bright colours, bright words, bright hopes, bright collaborations..."



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## WORKSHEET

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

### 7 The Scholar and his Cat



**Read** the first English translation of the poem *The Scholar and his Cat*. Make sure you understand all the words.

**Listen** to the poem being read by an Irishman on the Audio CD. The original language it was written in could be either ancient Irish or ancient Scottish Gaelic: the two languages were the same at the time this poem was written.

**Examine** the artwork by Simon Fraser. **Read** the information and interpretive sheets that accompany the poem / artwork.

Now read the second English translation, making sure you understand all the words, and **compare** it with the first translation. Which one do you like best and why?

You could try making a cassette recording of the two English translations. See which one is the harder to read, and which recording your friends prefer.

**Think** about all the things you do regularly from day to day, especially the ones you like. Divide them into things you do through the day and things you do at night. Now list these in the appropriate boxes in the table on the next page (p. 9).

Now **choose** an animal – one that you like: a pet like a cat or dog, a wild animal like a lion or elephant, a farmyard animal like a sheep or cow, or an ancient or imaginary creature like a dinosaur or a unicorn. Now think of the things which this creature would be doing from day to day.

Complete the table on p. 9, adding what your chosen animal does by day and night.

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## WORKSHEET

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

### 7 The Scholar and his Cat



## Things we do regularly

	1. My own name _____	2. Type of animal _____
b y d a y		
b y n i g h t		

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## WORKSHEET

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

### 7 The Scholar and his Cat



**Compare** the two columns (your own activities and the animal's) and the two rows (day and night). What are the similarities between your way of life and the animal's? Between day and night? What are the differences?

And now **compose a poem** and **make a picture** (or model, or other kind of artwork) comparing and contrasting your way of life with that of the animal you chose.

Now **read** the following extract of a poem by the famous American poet, Walt Whitman:-

*I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained;  
I stand and look at them long and long.  
They do not sweat and whine about their condition;  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins;  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God;  
Not one is dissatisfied – not one is demented with the mania of owning things;  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago;  
Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth...*

*(Leaves of Grass 32, ll. 682-689)*

**Discuss** this poem in your group or class.

Ask the teacher to read *Tae a Moose* by **Robert Burns** to you. It gives yet another picture of man's relationship with animals. Also **William Blake's Tiger**.

See if you can find a copy of the book that Simon Fraser and **George MacKay Brown** made together.

