



Reflections on the River Lee

Natasha Dukelow
University College Cork

In this series of images, evening light settles on the River Lee as it winds through the north-eastern part of University College Cork’s (UCC) campus. Taken from the Alumni Bridge, which connects Western Road to the campus through the college gates,¹ they capture the arboreal interplay along the banks of the river. Trees are mirrored on the river’s surface, where the light of a darkening sky and shifting patterns ripple through the reflections. This stretch of the river belongs to one of the two branches that form further upstream, near UCC’s Mardyke Arena. These branches then continue on to surround the central island that the city of Cork is built on. These images, taken on a Samsung S21, were recorded just before 21:00 on an April evening in 2025, respond to the past and reflect on the river’s enduring presence: they act as an engagement that brings the theme “Response: Reflection and Action” to life.

The Lee has its source in the Shehy mountains near Gougane Barra, a place steeped in legend. The National Folklore Collection preserves some charming folkloric stories that recount how the River Lee is said to have received its name. Although there is variation, the common theme is that a lake-dwelling creature, varyingly described as a “large animal”, “serpent”, “snake”, or “a big eel” (The Schools Collection: vol. 348, p. 148; vol. 281, p. 20; vol. 283, p. 437; vol. 378, p. 159; The Main Manuscript Collection, vol. 536, p. 549) was spotted lying in the water, prompting the exclamation “Tá sé in a Luighe”, or a similar phrase.

The eponymous Finbarr of Gougane Barra (*Guagán Barra*, meaning ‘the (rock-)cranny of Barra’; Logainm.ie) also features in these tales and sometimes plays a role in the formation of the river itself. One describes how the people that lived near the lake at Gougane Barra sought out St Finbarr, terrified of the serpent. The story notes that “there was no river flowing out of the lake then”, but when the saint cursed the serpent, it began

¹ UCC’s Heritage Services have compiled several pieces on the different bridges at this site, including images of earlier bridge structures. See the further reading section.

to make its way towards the sea, carving a channel behind it as it went, which allowed the water to run out of the lake and form a river. Upon reaching the sea, the serpent drowned (Schools' Collection, vol. 378, pp. 158–159).

Other tales note that it was the serpent's offence against the saint that led to its banishment. According to one story, the "monster appeared while St. Finbarr was sprinkling a crowd with holy water and snatched the vessel containing it out of the Saint's hand", resulting in the creature's expulsion from the area (Schools' Collection, vol. 341, pp. 591–592). Another tale relates how "for years [the snake] never molested anyone", but this respite ended when it interrupted a mass celebrated by Finbarr,

thrust[ing] his long neck in though an open window in the little church and snatch[ing] the Chalice from the altar. (The School's Collection, vol. 283, p. 437)

The snake retreated and the congregation "pelted the lake with stones", which provoked laughter from the creature. St Finbarr appeared, ringing the altar bell, which drove the snake down the river channel—notably, the river is already seemingly formed in this version and provides escape rather than being created by the serpent. The story ends with the snake emerging onto the riverbank near the mouth of the Lee, where Finbarr killed him, recovered his chalice and built his great monastery at Cork (The Schools' Collection, vol. 283, p. 437).

While reports of lake-dwelling monsters naturally invite scepticism, it is not only the folklore that raises questions of historicity. The very existence of a distinct Finbarr of Cork has also been called into question. Pádraig Ó Riain (1977; 1982; 1985; 1991, 1997) has argued that the figure known as St Finbarr is in fact a manifestation of the cult of St Finnian, the original of which grew up at Movilla in Co. Down before spreading across the island.² However, this interpretation is not universally accepted (e.g. Dumville, 1997) and in the words of Henry Jeffries (2004, p. 9) "the case against the saint's existence is unproven".³

² For further discussion see esp. Ó Riain, 1994, pp. ix–x; 2025, pp. 344–345.

³ For an overview of the scholarly debate, see Jeffries, 2004, pp. 9–14, who ultimately adopts an agnostic position on the matter due to the limited evidence available.

Nonetheless, quite apart from any uncertainty surrounding the existence of a historical St Finbarr of Cork, the narratives associated with his life and cult continue to resonate in the popular imagination. Standing on the banks of the Lee at UCC, one is prompted to reflect not only on the images mirrored on the water's surface, but also on the centuries of stories and tradition that have become intertwined with the river, the city and the university on its banks. UCC's motto, "Where Finbarr taught, let Munster learn", both reflects how deeply these legacies are embedded and stands as a direct response to their influence.



Reflections on the River Lee

©Natasha Dukelow

Further Reading

- Dumville, D.N. (1997) ‘St. Finnian of Movilla – Two Studies. I. St. Finnian of Movilla: Briton, Gael, Ghost?’, in Proudfoot, L. (ed.) *Down History and Society*. Dublin: Geography Publications, pp. 71–84.
- Jefferies, H.A. (2004) *Cork: Historical Perspectives*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- Logainm.ie, *Guagán Barra / Gougane Barra*. Available at: <https://www.logainm.ie/108550.aspx> (Accessed: 7 November 2025).
- Ó Riain, P. (2025) *A Dictionary of Irish Saints*. 2nd edn. Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- Ó Riain, P. (1997) *The Making of a Saint Finbarr of Cork 600–1200*. London: Irish Texts Society.
- Ó Riain, P. (1991) ‘Barra Naofa: Tuairisc an Irisleabhair’, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 96, pp. 117–124.
- Ó Riain, P. (1985), ‘Another Cork Charter: The Life of Saint Finbarr’, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 90, pp. 1–13.
- Ó Riain, P. (1982) ‘Towards a Methodology in Early Irish Hagiography’, *Peritia*, 1, pp. 146–159. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.Peri.3.598>.
- Ó Riain, P. (1977) ‘St. Finbarr: A Study in a Cult’, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 82, pp. 63–82.
- ‘The First Bridge’, *UCC Heritage Services* (2024). Available at: <https://www.ucc.ie/en/heritage/places-and-spaces/thefirstbridge/> (Accessed: 10 July 2025).
- ‘The Second Bridge’, *UCC Heritage Services* (2024). Available at: <https://www.ucc.ie/en/heritage/places-and-spaces/thesecondbridge/> (Accessed: 10 July 2025).
- ‘The Alumni Bridge’, *UCC Heritage Services* (2020). Available at: <https://www.ucc.ie/en/heritage/places-and-spaces/thealumnibridge/> (Accessed: 10 July 2025).

Folklore Collections Cited:

- “[The Main Manuscript Collection, Volume 0536, Page 549](#)” by Dúchas © National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin (UCD).
- “[The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0281, Page 020](#)” by Dúchas © National Folklore Collection, UCD.
- “[The School’s Collection, Volume 0283, Page 437–438 9](#)” by Dúchas © National Folklore Collection, UCD.

[“The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0341, Page 591–592”](#) by Dúchas ©
National Folklore Collection, UCD.

[“The School’s Collection, Volume 0348, Page 148”](#) by Dúchas ©
National Folklore Collection, UCD.

[“The School’s Collection, Volume 0378, Page 158–159”](#) by Dúchas ©
National Folklore Collection, UCD.