

THE MILLBROOK

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HIGHLIGHTER

Lay Preacher Became "Saint" to Many

(Editor's note) The following is a portion of a speech by Foster M Russell given at St. Andrews United Church, Millbrook on October 23, 1983. Mr. Russell is a well known author who lives in Cobourg and was born in Millbrook.

Famous Man

By Foster M. Russell

I want to tell you about a man who lived in this district last century. He could have been a neighbor and friend of your ancestors. He went about from farm to hamlet and town, teaching children, visiting the sick and helping the unfortunate.

This man did not belong to any church but he carried a Bible. He was a student of the Good Book, and a lay preacher. No such title as "the Reverend" was in front of his name. He was just plain "Joe", as his mother called him when he went to school in Ireland. He was still her boy, Joe, when he graduated from Dublin University.

An extremely sad event affected Joe's young life. At 24 he planned to marry, but his bride-to-be was drowned on the eve of the wedding day. Joe was lonely, distraught. He sought comfort from the Bible and religious friends. His mind was still troubled. He decided to leave his mother and father and come to Canada. When he arrived in 1845 he suffered ill health and had to return to Ireland.

Next year, Joe was hired to teach a family. He was invited by the parents to visit the Middle East. In reading this Bible, Joe was very much impressed by the story of St. Paul and his trip to Damascus.

He could hardly believe that he was walking on the street which was called Straight, where St. Paul was converted.

Damascus, a holy city. A marketplace for business. A place where pilgrims passed through on the way to Mecca. The feeling overpowered him. He sat down and wrote some lines about his reaction. The first line was, "What A Friend We Have In Jesus". It was the beginning of one of the most famous, best loved hymns in the world. Joe's first thought after the creation was his mother. He sent a copy home to Ireland.

In my lifetime I have read tales and heard stories about the hymn being written at several places, in Cavan township, in South Monaghan township, in Bewdley and in Port Hope. I found not one of these stories to be true.

After his experience in Damascus, in 1847, Joe returned to Western Ontario. He lived in several settlements, one of these was Brantford. In this town he did some lay preaching and started a school in 1850. Among those he taught were the children of John Charles Benet. Benet and his children liked Joe Scriven. Often they had supper together.

One day from his pocket, Scriven handed nine hymns to Benet in Brantford, one of which was, "What A Friend We Have In Jesus". And this was long before Scriven accepted the offer to teach the

Pengelley children at Rice Lake, his first home in this area.

Scriven was a modest man. Only a few friends saw the hymn bearing the title "Pray Without Ceasing", the original heading. That is why it was assumed the hymn was written in this district. Scriven was asked one day in Port Hope about the authorship. His only reply was, "the Lord and I did it between us" That inspiration came in Damascus.

The second tragedy concerning a planned marriage happened while Scriven was tutoring at Pengelley's. It was here he was to marry Eliza Catherine Roche, relative of the Pengelley's. There are various forms of baptism according to dogma and creed. Miss Roche accepted the idea of being baptized on a cold day of spring in Rice Lake. The young woman suffered from exposure and died, August 6, 1860.

Scriven survived this second tragedy.

In the 26 years which followed until his own death, Scriven gave all of his substance to people. He remained a good man and an active thoughtful man. His life was a daily sermon, with acts of kindness more important than preachments.

Scriven spoke in a plain way. His talks on the streets of Port Hope and outside town were simple and direct. He could repeat chapter after chapter of Scripture from memory.

The Scriven Way remained in the minds and hearts of people about him; in Peterborough, Durham and Northumberland Counties. He became a legend as a humanitarian, and a saint to many.

Mother Scriven sent parcels of clothing to Joe.

He gave them away. He shared the money she sent.

A friend provided fare for a trip to Toronto. He gave the money to a poor family and walked to Toronto. When he was without funds one day he gave his watch to be sold by a family in need of help.

He died a poor man. He did not know the magnitude, the rich legacy of a hymn he left to the world.

Death came mysteriously in a waterway near the Sackville home at Bewdley, where he had been taken following illness in his boarding house in Port Hope where he lived with a Mrs. Gibson for 22 years. Scriven made a request after the death of Eliza Catherine Roche, that he was to be buried beside his sweetheart.

In Port Hope the Langdons were neighbors. A daughter, Ada Montgomery, is now over 90. She said her father told her that Joseph Scriven spoke about the death of two lovers in France who were buried in a particular manner. Scriven was buried, "in such position near his sweetheart, with feet near feet, so that one day when they would rise from the grave they would face each other."

The first public recognition of the man and his hymn did not come until 33 years later. September 10, 1919. It was in Port Hope.

I think we all like the sound of the chimes. Perhaps you have heard the bells of St. Paul's Presbyterian Church. They were installed in 1912. Five years later the boom and beat rang out down through the valley and to the hills of Port Hope. The music was, "What A Friend We Have In Jesus". One block away in the Methodist Church, 100 pilgrims gathered to pay homage to Scriven, marking the 100th year of his birth.

That day after the service, the pilgrims went to Pengeley Cemetery to place flowers. Two little girls from Bailieboro walked nearly four miles to put their bouquet on the grave. Said one child to a pilgrim:

"This was the favorite hymn of my brother who was killed in the war, and this is what he would have liked to do."

Stranger than fiction, that touching story did not end there. Last summer a mature woman, twice married, called to see me at Creighton Heights. She bought two copies of my book. "I was one of those girls, Mr. Russell", she said, "and I am sending a copy to my daughter in Germany."

Enthusiasm about the memory of Scriven grew. A judge from Calgary, a former Millbrook boy, wrote letters to The Toronto Globe. A district ministerial association was organized and a decision made to collect funds for a monument.

May 24, 1920, the Queen's birthday, a holiday for all, one of the great days in the history of our counties. A monument was unveiled to a man and his hymn at Pengeley Cemetery, Rice Lake.

The program, which included the three verses of the hymn, was set in type by hand and printed by my father at the office of the Millbrook Reporter. I had that program reproduced for my book. The verses set by my father grace the back pages of the jacket cover.

My father was present for the unveiling by the Premier of Ontario, E.C. Drury. Also on the program were, from Millbrook, the Reverend Doctor William D. Lee, Presbyterian, the Reverend W.H. Higgs, Methodist; from Centreville, the Reverend A.R. McConachie. Patrons were Sir Robert Borden, Prime Minister of Canada and the Honorable W.L. Mackenzie King, Leader of the Opposition.

When I recounted the affair in my book, I suddenly recalled out of the blue haze of time, that Dorothy Higgs, a daughter of the Reverend Higgs, married that noted character, Harold Ballard of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Scriven died in 1886 not knowing the impact of the hymn, but the composer of the music knew. Converse died in 1918, 32 years after the demise of Scriven. At the Converse funeral in Highwood, New Jersey, a copy of "What A Friend We Have In Jesus" was gently placed in a cold hand in the coffin.

In my research which began in Ireland and extended to Honolulu, the hymn was known for its universal value. The words of help were there in answer to all manner of human problems.

Criminals condemned to death have asked to have the hymn sung. Singing of the hymn saved a woman from rape in Calgary, Alberta. It was used by Jesse James, the American outlaw. It was sung at the Vatican in Rome, behind the iron curtain in Moscow, in and out of churches of all denominations; in the Mormon Tabernacle, Salt Lake City; everywhere in the free and oppressed world.

The scene changes now to British Columbia, to a funeral of international interest which took place, July 2, 1981.

Terry Fox had made a courageous struggle, walking many miles on one good leg in the cause against a dreaded disease. He left to humanity an unending Marathon of Hope.

Terry was buried on a hillside he loved so well, where he often came to be alone to view the sparkling Port Coquitlam River and the majesty of the mountains.

At the funeral the congregation sang Joe Scriven's hymn, "What A Friend We Have In Jesus".