

'Good old Joe'

One of the most puzzling monuments I have ever come across is the one to Joseph Scriven opposite the entrance to the Port Hope Library. Its sole purpose seems to be to recite a hymn and tell you there is another monument thirteen miles away.

The story of this memento begins, in a way, with Ontario's most famous monument, the one to General Brock at Queenston Heights. As every Ontarian knows, Brock died at Queenston defending Upper Canada from American invasion in 1812.

A grateful government, probably before he died, granted him some large sections of land in the Newcastle District as a reward for his efforts. Given that this was the government of Upper Canada, the reward was probably in lieu of cash.

Isaac Brick was a Guernseyman, and after the wars were over, his older brother DeLisle Brock arranged for another semi-retired, Guernsey, officer, Capt. Robert L. Pengelly RN, to oversee the settling of that part of Isaac's estate. This was convenient, since Pengelly also had a chance to come into some land in upper Canada, and was in love with DeLisle's beautiful daughter, Harriet.

Pengelly paid an exploratory visit to Canada. Brock's land was situated north of Rice Lake and Pengelly arranged the sale of most of it to locals, keeping 200 acres for himself in South Monaghan. He then returned to Guernsey in September of 1834, to marry Harriet. In the Cobourg Archives we have a beautiful poem Harriet apparently wrote him as a remembrance of her, to keep with him

untimely death, Pengelly prospered and certainly nothing was too good for his young son. Accordingly, in 1847 or 1850 he hired the services of Joseph Medlicott Scriven, a thirty-one year old graduate of Trinity College, Dublin as a tutor for him.

One assumes that the Pengellys started life in Upper Canada as Church of England. Services were given for the locals at their home, and a small burial plot had been set up on their property, presumably for Harriet Brock's remains. Over time, though, the new Mrs. Pengelly became attracted to the teachings of the "Plymouth Brethren", Evangelical Protestants of whom Scriven was a noted member.

Mrs. Pengelly introduced Scriven to her niece, Catherine Eliza Roche, who converted as well. Part of the conversion involved adult baptism, by which the convert indicated a desire to accept the sect's teachings as a mature person. Scriven arranged for the baptism to take place as soon as possible. This meant immersion, for Catherine Eliza, in an icy, April, Rice Lake.

Not surprisingly, the Upper Canada winter again took its toll. Catherine Eliza died in the summer of that year, having never recovered from the pneumonia she contracted during her dip in the lake. She was buried in the Pengelly graveyard, on the north shore of the lake.

Now it was Joseph Scriven's turn to be inconsolable. For not only was Catherine Eliza engaged to be his bride at the time of her conversion and

COBOURG: PAST UNDERSTANDING



Colin Caldwell

death, she also turned out to be the second fiancée Scriven had lost to a watery fate.

Seventeen years before, as a youth of twenty-four, he had watched his fiancée drown in Banbridge, County Down Ireland, on the eve of their wedding day. This earlier incident is often connected in his biographers' and apologists' eyes with a dramatic change in Scriven's outlook on life.

Born in 1819, to a middle class Irish family with a father in the military, Scriven first pursued medical studies at Trinity College, Dublin. He interrupted them, briefly, for a start on a military career, only to resume his studies at Trinity with a possible view toward the ministry. Apparently he was not of sufficiently robust health for the military.

At some point, presumably after the death of his first fiancée, he set out in a tour of the middle east. Here, in Damascus, the scene of Paul's conversation, Scriven too had a form of revelation according to his biographer Foster Russell. This may have been the inspiration for the poem which has made Scriven famous, "What a Friend We have in Jesus".

Soon after that, Scriven was again disappointed in love,

though fortunately with better luck for the fiancée, who simply married someone else. We next find him, in the late 1840's, in Canada, tutoring in the area of Brantford. By this time his religious convictions were gathering strength. Indeed, they were beginning to overwhelm every other consideration as we hear of him confronting navvies at their work and play, admonishing them to repentance.

Soon after this we find him employed by the Pengellys, with the disastrous consequences we have seen. After leaving the Pengellys he took up with a fellow Plymouth Brother named James Sackville, who owned a mill at Bewdley.

By 1864 Scriven entered the period for which he would become best known. Now completely given over to the religious life, he preached and did good works continually in the Port Hope, Millbrook and Bewdley area. He appears to have based himself on a small house on Strachan Ave. in Port Hope, lodging with a woman named Mrs. Gibson for nearly 22 years.

On occasion, he would preach in the streets, in front of town hall and before taverns. At one point he was so severely beaten for his preaching before a local hostelry, that Sackville, his coreligionist, came down from Bewdley to rescue him from the street where he lay unconscious. Other times he was thrown in jail and, at least once, the local paper tried to arrange some less convenient place for him to apostrophize the citizenry. They worried about the locals missing work

on that first trip. The couple departed for their new life in March the following year. After two months they arrived in Quebec, to be established by no less a personage than the Governor General Sir John Colborne.

Once arrived in Cobourg, the couple landed and made their way overland to Pengelly's new property on the north shore of Rice Lake, east of Baillieboro. Here they lived in a log house, while Harriet drew up plans for the new home, which she wished to call the "Brocklands".

The harsh Upper Canada winter, however, proved too much. In June of 1836, Harriet Brock Pengelly died, and was buried in St. Peter's Churchyard, Cobourg.

Utterly heartbroken, Pengelly returned to Guernsey. Though his diary leaves a portrait of a man devastated by his loss and uninterested in the future, Pengelly did return to Canada the following year. Arriving early in August, he visited Harriet's grave in Cobourg, caught the morning steamer for Toronto, then back to Cobourg and, via steamer again, from Harwood up the lake to the Brocklands where he once again took up the settling of his land.

He arranged for lumber to be delivered across the lake from Bewdley and built stables and completed his home. He seems frequently to have visited in Cobourg. His diary does sound disheartened. He almost missed the excitement of the Rebellion that year through sheer neglect.

Then his thoughts began to revive and, come spring, he began paying attention to some of the local girls. By September of 1838 he was beginning to notice Miss Lydia Eliza Emily Roche, the daughter of Commodore Roche, of Peterborough. The two were married that year and in 1840 their first son Theodore Robert was born.

Though he continued to blame himself, and Upper Canada, for his first wife's

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Zoe' Scriven

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through too much preaching. To many of them, though, he was simply, "Good old Joe".

Through these years other legends were being woven about him as well; of his giving away food to the poor, or providing fire wood for the desperate, or selling or giving away personal articles of clothing for the benefit of others.

It was probably about the time when he was tutoring in Brantford that he composed his most-famous work, "What a Friend . . .".

Scriven did not take direct credit for it; nor did he write the music for the hymn. Various people, to whom he gave copies, sent them to newspapers as inspiration to others. One copy from a New York paper found itself in the hands of a Cleveland organ salesman and composer, Charles C. Converse, who set it to music sometime in the 1880's after Scriven's death.

Scriven, though, continued to preach, do good works himself and compose religious poetry, some of which he had published. In 1875, on a journey to Bewdley he came across a seven year old child huddling in the snow on a dark wintry night. He took the child in, arranged for the child's removal from an abusive parent, befriended the boy and undertook to educate him. This one act of kindness was to have dramatic consequences.

By 1886, Scriven's strenuous religious observance began to wear him out. The stories told from this period include a walk to Toronto, for a religious conference, Scriven having given away the railway fare.

There is also a curious reference to his preaching under a well-known tree in Cobourg.

Sometime, presumably in the late summer of 1886, Scriven's friend James Sackville discovered him, "prostrate in mind and body" in Port Hope. Scriven confessed, weakly, that he feared he might do something to "dishonor God", or "bring reproach". Sackville took him back to the mill in Bewdley, to nurse him back to health.

On the evening of either Aug. 10, or Oct. 10, Sackville shifted his nightly vigil to another room while Scriven lay, "unable to rise from his bed." The next day at noon, locals found Scriven, "in an attitude of prayer" lying, drowned, in the nearby mill-stream.

Speculation arose that Scriven had risen from his bed to go to a religious meeting, or, according to the Dictionary of Canadian Biography entry, that he had risen to get himself a drink of water and slipped into the stream.

A noted Irish hymnologist, G.A. Osborough, commented in a nice Freud/Jungian way, that Scriven had sought the means of death which had taken his two beloved fiancées.

Was it suicide? The almost universal feeling is No. If not an accident, says local opinion, it was murder.

For, there was rumored to have been another watcher that fatal night, and it was none other than the little local hellion and ne'er-do-well that Scriven had rescued on that snowy night of 1875.

TO BE CONTINUED...