

# *Joseph Medicott Scriven*

(Humanitarian)

1819 – 1886

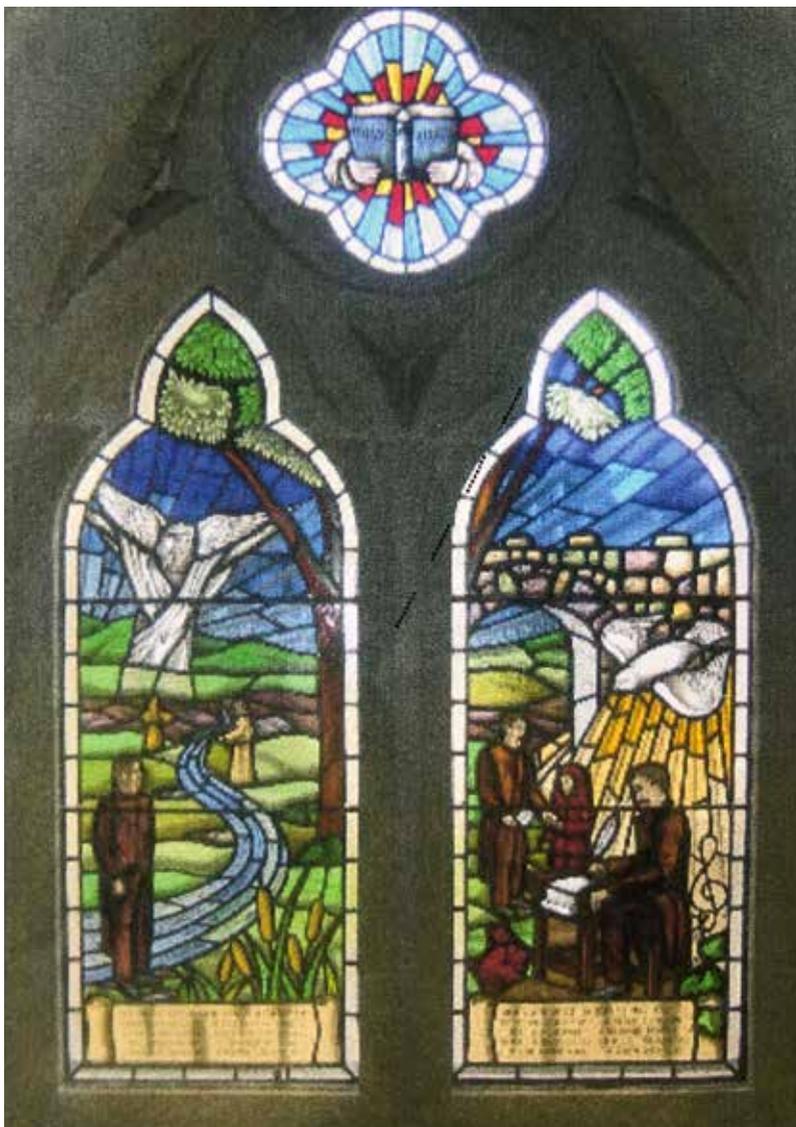
***BICENTENARY  
CELEBRATION***

***8-15th September 2019***

By Ven. W. J. Scott MBE

*On behalf of the the Committee organising the Bicentenary of his Birth. 10 Sept 1819*

## *Scriven Memorial Window Seapatricks Parish Church*



*Erected as a Millenium Project and dedicated on 15th April 2002  
by Rt. Rev. Henry Scriven (Great, Great Nephew)*

**i**

**Born:** September 10, 1819, Banbridge, County Down, Ireland  
**Died:** August 10, 1886, Port Hope, Ontario, Canada  
**Buried:** Pengelly Cemetery, near Port Hope, Ontario, Canada  
**Siblings:** William 1917, George 1821, John 1823,  
Catherine Anne Mary 1825 and Jane 1828.

# Joseph Medlicott Scriven

## 1819 - 1886

Joseph Medlicott Scriven was born at Ballymoney Lodge, Banbridge, County Down, on the 10th September 1819. He was the second son of Captain John Scriven (1780-1850), Royal Marines, who was a Churchwarden of Seapatrick Parish in 1820 and 1821 and also one of the vestrymen appointed to build a bridge over the Bann for the convenience of worshippers in the old church. His mother Jane (1787-1866) was the sister of a Wiltshire vicar, Rev. Joseph Medlicott.

When he was sixteen Joseph registered at Trinity College Dublin but left after two years to enter, in 1837, the Addiscombe Military College which trained young gentlemen as cadets for the East India Company. Joseph however, did not have a strong constitution and it was quite obvious that he was not cut out for the rigours of a military life and after two years resigned from the college. This was a bitter disappointment for his father, perhaps, as the official reason for the resignation states, ‘the health of Joseph Scriven rendered him unfit for service in a tropical climate.’



*Ballymoney Lodge, Banbridge*

He returned to Trinity College where his obituary reads ‘he was educated for the church’, and in 1842, when he was 23, he obtained a BA – on the same day that brother William became an MD. He took a series of jobs as tutor to various families around Ireland, while his brother became a doctor in Dublin where by this time his parents had also relocated.

It was shortly after his graduation that he fell in love with a Banbridge girl – whose name seems to have been lost. After two years they became engaged to be married with the wedding planned for the summer of 1843. Sadly, on the day before their wedding, when she was crossing the River Bann on horseback, she was thrown from the horse into the river. She drowned in full view of Joseph who was waiting for her on the far bank. There appears to be no surviving contemporary record of the accident so the actual location and detail of the tragedy is not known.

This great shock and loss affected his outlook from then on. He became morose and was rarely ever seen to smile. About this time he came across the “separatist” movement in Dublin, which later became better known as Plymouth Brethren. There was already a controversy about ‘the true spiritual church in Dublin’ and responding to the unity and love which the new sect offered, he joined them. He was also moved at this time to escape the memories of his dead fiancée so he decided to move to Canada. Having been told of

his plans, His mother bought him an expensive coat to help him fight the rigours of the Canadian winter, only to discover later that he no longer had the coat. When questioned about it, Joseph told his mother that he'd given it to a beggar in Dublin. "Mother" he told her "I gave my coat to a man who needed it more than I did." Scriven's change of religion caused an estrangement from his family who were staunchly Anglican. They in turn having departed Banbridge to live elsewhere.

On the 9th of May 1845 Joseph Scriven sailed for Canada on a barque named Perseverance. A country with family connections, his grandfather William Barclay Scriven had died in Quebec in 1782. Three weeks later he docked in Montreal and then he made his way to Woodstock, near Hamilton, to stay with a Brethren family, the Courtneys, who he'd known in Dublin. After only two months in Canada he became ill and, not wishing to be a burden on the Courtneys, sold all his belongings and returned to Ireland via Quebec. Where, as we find in a letter to his brother William, he found employment as a tutor to the son of a Dr Bartley, the surgeon to the First Royal Dragoons, who were based in Dundalk.

As a member of the Bartley household he was invited to accompany them on a tour of the Middle East, a trip that was to be an amazing revelation to him. He was particularly impressed with Damascus and walked down 'the street which was called Straight' which had seen the conversion of St Paul. It seems this was an inspiration for him for he felt the Lord had also spoken to him as he walked upon it.

After his Middle East experience Joseph moved to Plymouth in England and developed a very close relationship with a Miss Falconer, a relative of a family he'd known in Canada. Another suitor appeared on the scene and Scriven unselfishly yielded to his rival and any thoughts of matrimony were again dashed. In 1847 the three young people moved back to Canada and settled in Woodstock, then a centre for many English settlers. His two friends married with misfortune striking them as the husband soon became mentally ill, but Scriven remained a staunch and loyal friend in their time of need.

Joseph stayed on for some time in Western Ontario taking employment as a tutor but his deeply religious feelings prompted him to give away nearly all his earnings to poor people. A remembered comment from the time quoted an old woman who knew him as saying "I never knew of another person who was so consistent as a Christian." It is about this time that we hear about his writing 'Pray Without Ceasing' the original text for his famous hymn, for it is thought he gave a copy of it to one of his employers, Mr John Charles Benet.

In the 1850s Scriven moved to Eastern Ontario where he started work as a private tutor to the son of Captain [some reports call him Commander] Robert Lamport Pengelly, Pengelly had retired from the Royal Navy and moved to Canada in 1834 to take over a tract of land he'd been given for distinguished service in the Royal Navy. This was on the north shore of Rice Lake.

Shortly after joining the Pengellys, Scriven established a friendship with the family of James Sackville who lived in the nearby town of Bewdley and ran a small saw-mill in the area. He also joined an Assembly of the Plymouth Brethren, where it is most likely he first met the Sackvilles, who were also Brethren.



### *Scriven Memorial, Pengelly Cemetery.*

*'For many years the grave of Joseph Scriven remained unmarked. But on Sept 10, 1919, the centenary of his birth, a pilgrimage of clergymen visited the grave, joined hands around it, and sang the hymn which has brought comfort and uplift to thousands of hearts wherever the English language is spoken.*

*"Under the leadership of the Rev M.W. Lee of the Millbrook Presbyterian Church, the Joseph Scriven memorial committee was formed to erect a monument in his memory. On the white granite monument which stands 13 feet high, overlooking the shining waters of Rice Lake, the words of the hymn are inscribed. It was dedicated on May 24, 1920, when 6000 people gathered, including the Premier of Ontario, Hon. EC Drury.*

*'In paying tribute to Scriven the premier said: 'He did not build a railway or amass a fortune. But he did more than that. He contributed a thought that will outlive railroads and fortunes. It will go on enriching the lives of people, when other things of material nature have crumbled and perished.'*

*The whole Cemetery including the Scriven memorial was later Dedicated as a Place of Historical Importance by Rt. Rev. FH Wilkinson (Lord Bishop of Toronto) on 9th May 1964.*

It was in the Sackville's house one night in 1857 that Joseph Scriven, weighed down with loneliness and overcome with despondency, poured out his heart to God and his burden was miraculously lifted. This seems to be the time he wrote the words to 'What a friend we have in Jesus' as he developed the theme on which he had written previously. He did not however, show the hymn to anyone nor is there a record of his making it available for publication.

Joseph now fell in love again when he met Mrs Pengelly's young niece Eliza Catherine Roche. Although Mrs Pengelly was a member of the Church of England she turned to the teachings of the Brethren. When Joseph and Catherine became so deeply attached Catherine also chose to join the Brethren and was 'immersed' as part of the ritual for the Baptismal Service. Unfortunately the choosing of such an early date in the year for this baptism proved fatal for Catherine. In April the waters of Rice Lake were still icy and a resulting chill developed into pneumonia and she died on 6th August 1860.

This tragedy remained with Scriven until his dying day. Three times he had lost a woman he loved and fate again denied him marriage. It seems this last instance was probably the most penetrating; it was an affair of genuine lasting love beyond the grave.

Scriven diligently continued to serve the poor and helpless. His was practical Christianity and he became known as 'the man who saws wood for poor widows and sick people unable to pay.' He gave away all his private income for the benefit of others. When not working he was found preaching on street corners "(he) earnestly delivered the message he so desired to have all hear and believe." One of his favourite places to preach was a certain street corner in Port Hope where he was occasionally "set upon by ruffians who beat him severely" often leaving him to lie in the gutter for two hours or more before he could stagger home. Other reports say that as he preached he would be met "with a hail of mud balls and jeers" but he would brush off his clothes, retrieve his Bible from the mud, and walk away with dignity.

Even officialdom was set against him for on August 4th 1873 Joseph Scriven was put into jail by Constable Johnston for preaching on the street in Port Hope. A magistrate gave him his liberty but he was required to appear in court where the Police Magistrate ordered him to cease preaching on the front street on Saturdays. The local newspaper The Weekly Guide commented that the constable had been generally condemned for arresting Scriven especially as profanity and obscenity went unchecked in the community. Seven years later on 2nd September 1880 The Weekly Port Hope Times carried the following report:

*"A man named Scribbins [Scriven] has, for some time past, been in the habit of preaching on Ontario Street near Walkton, yelling and shouting like a good fellow occasionally. This man has become a nuisance and we appeal to the authorities to remove him.*

*If he must preach, let him take up position in the market-square in the afternoon, where he will not be in the way, and where he will not retard anyone from work which requires to be done in a given time, Mr Scribbins may be doing good but we fail to see it."*

In spite of resistance from many quarters, he stayed on in his isolated Hope Port cottage, eventually becoming a tutor to the Boulton family.

As a member of the Plymouth Brethren, Scriven would not have his photograph taken because to him it would have been a form of vanity but the picture on the front cover came from a photograph in the possession of a great nephew, Dr W H Scriven who had every reason to believe it was an authentic picture of his great uncle Joseph Scriven.

In his late sixties, Scriven's body was worn out with toil and his mind wearied with disappointment so his old Brethren friend, James Sackville, took him back to his house to spend his last days. One evening Mr Sackville was searching a drawer on Scriven's behalf and came across the original copy of *What A Friend We Have In Jesus* which had been written many years earlier. Having read it Sackville asked him how he'd managed to write such a beautiful hymn and it seems Scriven replied simply "The Lord and I did it between us." He explained he had written it to send to his mother to bring her comfort in illness before her death and that it had not been intended for other eyes.

It is said that Joseph believed in living the Sermon on the Mount both literally and practically, even sharing the clothes from his own body. He was no great poet but the simple words of his hymn are born out of experience of his tragic life. The very simplicity of the text has been its appeal and strength.

By October 1886 Scriven, never of robust health (though of generous stature), was seriously ill and frequently in high fever and destitute. A £20 gift from his Dr Brother William in Dublin, arrived after his death. Mr Sackville meanwhile brought him to his own home to care for him. On the night of 10th October having talked together till near midnight Mr Sackville retired to let him rest. Sometime between then and morning Scriven must have wandered outside. Close by Mr Sackville's house was a dam/millrace which served the saw-mill and it is supposed he slipped and fell into the sluice-way, a hole six or seven foot deep, for that was where he was found the next morning. He was 67 years old. The coroner decided that it was unnecessary to hold an inquest although some doubts have since been cast upon this decision for it was thought later that Scriven had been, in fact, far too ill to have risen from his bed by himself! Suggestions of euthanasia by friends, which some have made however seems totally at odds to his strong Christian belief and practice.



*Port Hope Cottage*

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Joseph Scriven was buried in what was then the private Pengelly cemetery at Bailieboro, Cavan County, on the shores of Rice Lake. Following a promise Mr Pengelly had given years before, Joseph was buried near the remains of his beloved Catherine. He was interred 'in such a position near his sweetheart, with feet near feet, so that one day when they would rise from the grave they would face each other.' Today a thirteen foot white obelisk marks the grave. Mr Scriven left a number of papers on religious topics, such as: "What Church," "The Church of God," "Priesthood," "The Ministration of the Spirit," "Our Assembly," "The Coming of the Lord," "Discipline," etc., etc., which have been published by Mr. Sackville.

“What A Friend We Have In Jesus” appears to have been first published anonymously in 1865 by Lorenzo Hastings of Boston in ‘Social Hymns, Original and Selected’ and then again in Bliss and Sankey’s ‘Gospel Hymns and Sacred Songs’ in 1875 with the author named as Rev Horatius Bonar but by the time the third edition was printed it was not included because Bonar denied he’d written it. How the hymn became published will remain a mystery although we do know Joseph was prone to giving away copies of his works and the Wilsons, a printing and publishing family in Port Hope, were certainly given a copy about 1870, but as a personal memento and not for publication. If the hymn had been published in 1865 we may ask why the Wilsons were asked not to publish it.

It’s popularity is undoubtedly in no small measure, due to its simple lyrics and catchy tune, appended by Converse.

When he first wrote the hymn there were only two verses; the rest was added after he had the distressing experience of being snubbed and slighted by friends on an occasion when he was particularly shabbily dressed. This led him to insert the third verse “Do thy friends despise, forsake thee...” expressing disappointment at the rejection he’d encountered.

Joseph Scriven lived the Christian life of service to his fellows humbly and with great unselfishness. He became poor through his beneficence of others and actually lived as a labourer until the end of his life. He sold all he had and gave it to the poor; he had nothing left to give. He was a ‘good man’ whose actions must be regarded as saintly although one would hesitate to call him a saint but he was beatified by his kindness to others. To some Scriven was the embodiment of charity; but to him, his actions were acts of conscience.

## ***What a Friend we have in Jesus***

*What a Friend we have in Jesus  
All our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry  
Everything to God in prayer.  
Oh, what peace we often forfeit  
Oh, what needless pain we bear.  
All because we do not carry  
Everything to God in prayer.*

*Have we trials and temptations?  
Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged  
Take it to the Lord in prayer!  
Can we find a friend so faithful?  
Who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus know our every weakness  
Take it to the Lord in prayer.*

*Are we weak and heavy-laden  
‘Cumbered with a load of care?  
Precious Saviour, still our refuge  
Take it to the Lord in prayer!  
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?  
Take it to the Lord in prayer!  
In His arm He’ll take and shield thee  
Thou wilt find a solace there.*

This is as Joseph Scriven wrote it 1857.

The extra lines were added when the poem was put to music by Charles C. Converse.

"Pray without ceasing"

What a Friend we have in Jesus,  
All our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry  
Every thing to God in prayer!

Oh! what peace we often forfeit,  
Oh what needless pain we bear!  
All, because we do not carry  
Everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations?  
Is there trouble everywhere?  
We should never be discouraged:  
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we cold and unbelieving,  
Cumbered with a load of care?  
Here the Lord is still our refuge:  
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Joseph Scriven

1879

Curate, James McCreight, made a slight hash of Joseph Scriven's entry in the Parish Register.

Joseph Scriven & James Scriven of Ballymoney  
Lodge Esq. & Jane McCreight his wife  
Married - Ballymoney Sept 10<sup>th</sup> 1879  
- of the Parish - J.M.C.

Original Baptismal Registration



*The Scriven memorial in Port Hope, paid for with funds raised by David Kidd, was first erected by Rutter Granite at the corner of Ontario and Hope Streets. After it was knocked over by a car in 1941, it was dumped behind the library on Queen Street, then moved to the Town shed. It lay around for more than a year before public interest led to its being put in its present location which, before the old Post Office was stupidly torn down in 1970, was the corner of Queen and Hector Streets.*



*Scriven Memorial, Downshire Place, Banbridge.*

## *Eliza Catherine Roche* (1837 – 1860)

Joseph Scriven's fiancé was the daughter of Andrew Roche, a brother of Emily, the second wife of Robert Lamport Pengelly (1798-1875).

In 1950 Pengelly invited Scriven to come from Clinton, Ontario where he was teaching school, to be a private tutor to his son Theodore Robert Pengelly (1840-1925).

Scriven lived for five years near Bailieboro at the Pengelly home, 'Brockland', so named by Pengelly and his first wife, Harriet Catherine Brock (1809-1836). Here he met Eliza who was already consumptive. In order to join the Plymouth Brethren sect, as she was anxious to do, she first had to undergo a full-submersion baptism. This was carried out in the icy April waters of Rice Lake, and the effects of all that dunking hastened her death.

It's likely Joseph wrote this poem in response to Eliza's passing.

*They've decked thee o'er with flowers,  
But like thyself they'll fade  
Ere the freshness of their morning hours  
Gives place to evening shade.*

*They've decked thee o'er with flowers,  
No garland they can weave  
Will spread such grace around the brow  
As Jesus' name will leave.*

*They've decked thee o'er with flowers,  
But lovelier far than they  
Will bloom thy bright and loving powers  
On Jesus' nuptial day.*

*They've decked thee o'er with flowers,  
And yet no longer thee;  
'Tis but the empty prison house  
From which thou now are free.*



### ***Charles Crozat Converse***

Born October 7, 1834, Warren, Massachusetts; died October 18, 1918, Highwood, New Jersey; buried Bristol Cemetery, Canandaigua, New York.

*Wrote the music inspired by the poem 'Pray Without Ceasing' for what became the hymn 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus'*

# *A Life in Summary - Joseph Scriven*

The following is a short summary of the man's life as it is generally understood by Ven. W.J. Scott MBE on behalf of the committee organizing the Bicentenary of his Birth. Mr Bobby Evans, Mrs Arlene Allen and Mr David Bryans

Spending much of his life in Canada as he did, much is vague and conflicting. These facts gleaned from local historical records and internet content (see acknowledgements) but the truth is very much an enigma.

*A summary is as follow:*

- 10/09/1819 Born Ballymoney Lodge, Banbridge  
(possibly baptized on same day because of ill health)
- 1835 At 16 went to Trinity College Dublin for 2 years.
- 1837 Attended Addiscombe College for 2 years.
- 1839 Returned to Trinity College Dublin.
- 1842 At 21 graduated on same day as his brother William.
- 1843 Lost his fiancée in horse / drowning accident.
- 1845 Went briefly to Canada but soon returned home.
- 1847 Returned to Canada
- c1855 Wrote Hymn (on news of mother's illness) living Sackville's, Bewdley  
(Rice Lake, Canada)
- 1857 Moved to Port Hope.
- 1860 August - Due to marry Eliza Roche (who died of pneumonia following baptism in Rice Lake - Canada)
- 1869 Published – Hymns & verses
- 1886 Found dead in Millrace (buried in Pengelly's Cemetery)

## *Acknowledgements*

In 1895 a few short years after Scriven's death a little booklet giving a sketch of his life and including a number of his hymns was written and published by a number of friends. This and other information regarding the Canadian side of Scriven's life can be found on the internet. Banbridge information is thanks to research by the late J Harris Rea and published in Banbridge Chronicle in 1966 and also Richard Linn's – History of Banbridge 1935 and the Millenium Booklet.

