

# THE REV. WILLIAM FREDERICK JOHNSTON, MA

BY CANON MICHAEL BARTON

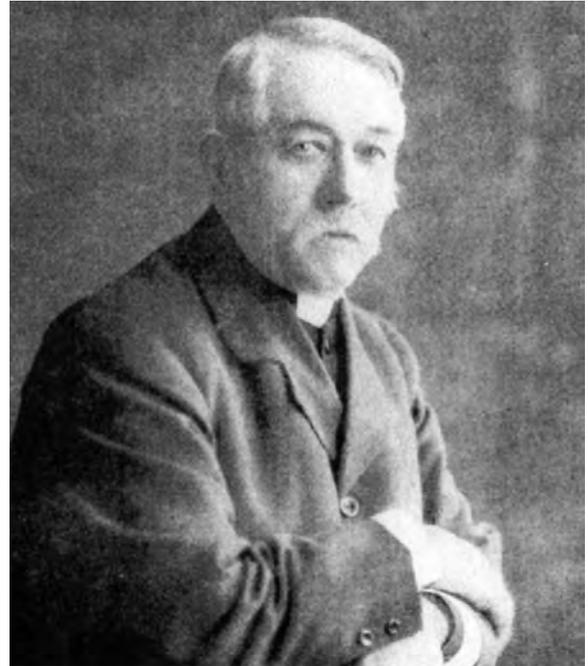
**T**he Rev. Frederick William Johnson was born at Cochin, Kerala, South India. He was a predecessor of mine as rector of the parish of Acton. How did a man born 7000 miles from here as the crow flies, and 14,000 miles by sea via the Cape of Good Hope, end up here in Poyntzpass? It is an interesting story.

It is reasonably easy to supply some straightforward biographical details about Mr. Johnson, for they are given in Canon Fleming's book, *Armagh Clergy, 1800-2000*. But there was so much more to Johnson than the duties and interests associated with being a country clergyman. He had been a teacher and was an entomologist, obviously of some standing, for he was a fellow of the Royal Entomological Society. Entomology is the study of insects and bugs. And that is where I find Mr. Johnson most interesting. So, let me first deal with his early life, education and career; then his role as rector of Acton; and finally his lifelong interest as a naturalist and expert on beetles.

We go back to where Johnson was born. His parents were the Rev. Edmund Johnson, a Church of Ireland clergyman, and his wife, who were working as missionaries with the Church Missionary Society at Travancore, India, between 1843 and 1859. Their son, William Frederick, was born on 20th April 1852 at Cochin on the south west coast of the sub-continent, 10 degrees north of the Equator. By the time his father's service in India was over, Johnson was 7 years old.

It seems his parents returned to England, for the first part of his secondary education was at Weymouth Grammar School. This was followed by a period at Arlington House School, Portarlinton, Co. Laois. Before entering Trinity College Dublin, he was a pupil at the Royal School Armagh. At Trinity College Dublin Johnson graduated with a BA degree in 1876. He received his MA in 1880.

Johnson was made deacon in 1879 at the age of 27, and a year later he was ordained priest. He served his diaconate, not in a parish, but while he was an assistant master at his old school, the Royal Armagh – a post he held for 2 years.



*William Frederick Johnston 1852 - 1934*

From 1881 to 1895 Johnson was a Vicar Choral at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh, (a post which requires a singing voice), serving under Dean William Reeves, and Dean George Alexander Chadwick. These were two men of academic ability and achievement, both of whom became bishops. Undoubtedly they had their influence upon their Vicar Choral, especially the former. Dean Reeves, a Cork man, had himself been a schoolmaster in Ballymena, and also Vicar Choral at the Cathedral. When Johnson was holder of that post, Reeves became President of the Royal Irish Academy (1891), and we shall see later the contribution Johnson was to make to that body.

Reeves, who published a number of works of an historical and antiquarian nature, became Bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore in 1886. His successor, George Chadwick, also a Cork man, served as Dean for 10 years before becoming Bishop of Derry, following William Alexander, who left Derry for the Primacy. His wife, Frances, was the famous hymn writer.

In the 14 years that Johnson held the post of Vicar Choral, he was also Principal of the Cathedral Grammar School. The school was near where the present See

House now stands. All that remains is the old doorway that gave access to the schoolyard. This school catered mainly for the education of the choirboys at the Cathedral. An old photograph shows the Principal, Mr. Johnson, with his pupils. I am told, by the grandson of Johnson's successor as Principal, that the official residence was at No.8 Vicars Hill, opposite the Cathedral.

In the year that Johnson took up his post as Vicar Choral at the Cathedral (1881), he married Emma Susan, daughter of William Hardy, solicitor, of Armagh. She was to be his partner for 40 years, but they never had a family.

In 1895, sixteen years after his ordination, and never having served a curacy, Johnson became Rector of Acton, where he was to remain for 26 years. A particular source is that of the records and registers kept in the church safe: - Baptisms, Marriages and Burials (which reveal little more than the incumbent's signature), the Preacher's Books, and the Vestry Minute Books. These do not tell us much about Johnson's character other than that he faithfully fulfilled the duties of his calling.

The Preacher's Book records every service conducted in the church, with the numbers attending, the amount of the collection, and the signature of the officiant, with a comment here and there about weather conditions or some notable event. On 10<sup>th</sup> November 1895, the 23rd Sunday after Trinity, Johnson conducted his first service in Acton Church and noted: "*read myself in*". One hundred and ten parishioners were present that morning. At the end of the year he calculates that the average morning attendance is 83, and in the evening, 47. In the year 1897 Johnson estimates that the numbers attending Morning Prayer total 4,296. with 2,922 at Evening Prayer. Twenty years later, in 1918, the only other year that Johnson makes the same calculations, the figures for the morning are 2,553 and for the evening 1,747.

On 1st January 1901, Johnson notes, "*a special service for the first day of the new century*". From time to time there is a note, as that of 23rd November 1913, "*no evening service by leave of the Primate owing to my illness*". It seems that Mr. Johnson did not always enjoy the best of health. The last entry with Johnson's signature is on the First Sunday in Advent, 27th November 1921, and there is a rather poignant story behind that, to which I shall return later.

The Vestry Minute Book helps us to see the sort of administrative business that Johnson had to deal with in a small and obviously poor parish. Year after year the vestry is short of money, and there is recorded appeal after appeal to the parishioners to give a little more. It appears that the appeals often fall upon deaf ears, or maybe the fact is that the parishioners are just as short of money themselves. Frequently Johnson must have wondered if there was going to be enough income to pay his stipend. Regular approaches are made to the Poor Parishes Fund, and even to the Primate, to put a few pounds in the direction of Acton Parish. Occasionally the landowners and gentry in the parish come up with an extra few shillings to keep the parish in the black.

In 1898 the new rector began to make his presence felt. We read that the rector "*submitted plans and specifications of proposed new vestry*". The Select Vestry approves, but leaves the rector to approach the contractors. This is the start of a protracted business (and there are other examples in the minutes). There is a response from just one contractor. He will do the job for £57. That is too much for the Vestry. They want other builders to be contacted. Four months after he raised the subject the rector suggests that parishioners might do the work themselves, as there is only £30 available to do the job. It is then proposed that he should approach the Archbishop for additional aid. Nearly six months later the rector "*has not heard (any) result*" from the Archbishop. By the next month



**W.F. Johnston, headmaster with pupils from the Cathedral Grammar School, Armagh 1894**

the Archbishop has made £10 available, and the rector is instructed to approach the contractor again. The summer passes. They are back to square one. Only £30 is available, and the one contractor still interested wants £50. Subscriptions are to be sought from the parishioners. Nearly a year later, a ray of sunshine breaks through. The rector "*stated that £59.11.6 towards erection of new vestry had been received and same sum expended on vestry and other improvements and alterations in connection with church*". I am sure Johnson added a heartfelt "Amen".

One long drawn-out piece of business is concluded. Another begins – the Saga of the Sexton – which rumbles on over the years. The minutes inform us that the rector had drawn up a list of the sexton's duties – a sure sign, I believe, that trouble was brewing. In April 1900 the list of the rector's requirements from his sexton read: -

*"He shall attend all services, ordinary and special, ring the bell, and have all matters needful for services of church in proper order and ready for use. He shall keep the interior of the church clean and tidy and shall see that the pews are dusted and aisles kept swept, and shall wash down the whole church twice in the year... He shall keep the graveyard in good order and cut the ivy on the church when needful. He shall convey coal from the cart to the coalhole and pack same. He shall light fires, clean stoves and grates, light lamps and candles, clean lamps and candlesticks, dig graves, and attend baptisms, marriages and funerals. He shall light fires in the Sunday School and shall perform such other duties, as the Select Vestry shall call upon him to do from time to time. The salary shall be £7.0.0 per annum, to be paid quarterly"*.

A number of years go by, and it seems there is peaceful co-existence between rector and sexton, until March 1908, when the rector brought forward "*the conduct of R.G., sexton, absent from duty on the previous Sunday and neglecting to light the fire or prepare the church for morning service – the cause being drunkenness*". It was resolved to bring the sexton before the Select Vestry to be "*severely reprimanded and informed that if he repeated the offence he would be dismissed*". The sexton promised the Vestry that it would not occur again. Over the next 8 years there are constant references to the sexton and his sometimes stormy relationship with the rector and Select Vestry. He was reprimanded on a number of occasions, and resigned at least 3 times, always to be reinstated. Finally, on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1916, there appears the report that the rector "*referred to the death of the late sexton, R.G., who had faithfully served the church for a period of 34 years*". However, it was not long before the new sexton, having demanded and received a pay increase to £10.0.0., offered his resignation (19.11.1919), was persuaded to stay, resigned again (10.4.1920), agreed to continue – but would not dig graves; resigned once more (1.12.1920), and had a successor appointed. This new appointment lasted a fortnight, when sexton No.3 resigned. Sexton No.2 was asked to reconsider his position, and indicated, "*that he*

*was willing to undertake the duties again*". The salary was increased by £2.0.0.

The Vestry minutes contain many other interesting pieces of information, and the rector is always there at the helm. There are General Synod and Diocesan matters; rows about seating in the church-, the faulty heating apparatus and, after another long wrangle, about its faulty replacement, negotiations about glebe repairs; mapping the graveyard; a parish magazine which failed to materialize; references to the Great War; arrangements about sales and concerts to raise money. In one instance a letter was received from Mr. R.J. Moore, superintendent of the GNR, "*stating that he would cause the 8.20 train from Dublin to call at Poyntzpass for the purpose of picking up those who would be traveling for the concert to be held in Poyntzpass on behalf of church funds*". Mr. Moore received "*a most cordial vote of thanks*".

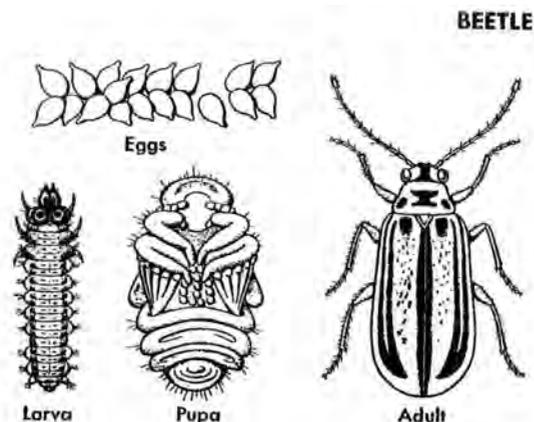
A worrying note appears now and again, reflecting remarks in the Preacher's Book, about the rector's illness. A minute of 26th April, 1919 mentions "*the unavoidable absence of rector owing to illness, and a resolution is passed that we beg to offer to our esteemed rector our sincere sympathy in the long and trying illness through which he has passed, and we pray that he will, daily gain strength and be spared to guide the affairs of this parish for many years to come*". He was to be rector of Acton for only 2 more years.

A meeting on 25th July 1921 reports a number of repairs done to the church: - "*Inside walls cleaned and distempered; pulpit, reading desks, doors varnished; pipes, windows and gates painted; panes replaced – and enough money left to purchase a curtain for the main entrance*". At last Johnson has the church in satisfactory order and, it seems, free of debt. However, four months later, on 3rd December 1921, we read of the death of the rector's wife, and a tribute comes from the Select Vestry. The Vestry tenders "*to the Rev. WF Johnson, incumbent of this parish, and to Miss Hardy (his sister-in-law) our very sincere sympathy caused by the sudden death of Mrs. Johnson, who was an active and faithful worker in the parish for the past 26 years and always gave willingly of her best in every effort made for the improvement of God's house*". Mrs. Johnson had been buried beside Acton Parish Church the day before. Her husband never conducted another service in Acton.

He moved from Acton Parish to be curate-in-charge of the parishes of Louth and Killincoole. He retired a year later. The same year, 1922, he was married a second time – to Wilhelmina, daughter of W.N. McDowell of Tullycahan. Co. Louth, in Kilbroney Parish Church, Rostrevor. Johnson died on 28th March 1934 and is buried with his first wife at Acton.

The most revealing evidence about the sort of man WF Johnson was comes from his activities as an entomologist

– from his joint authorship of *A List of the Beetles of Ireland*, and various contributions to important publications. First, the list of beetles: it was published in the proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy in July 1902. In it I began to discover the breadth and wealth of Johnson's talents. His ability, knowledge and skill were obviously recognized by the most highly qualified people in the field, for the Academy itself had commissioned him, along with J.N. Halbert, to compile the definitive list of the coleoptera of Ireland.

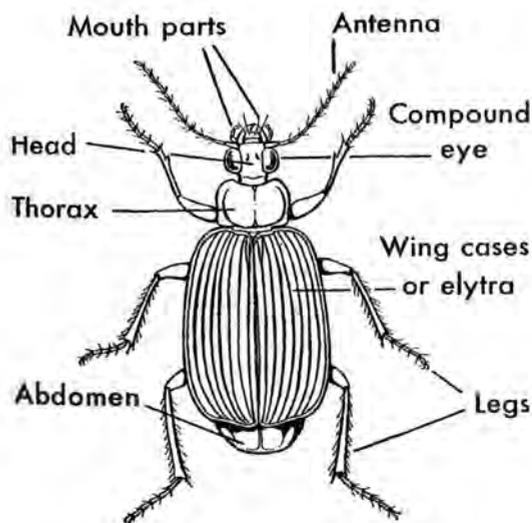


*Four stages in the life of a beetle*

Perhaps it is time for definitions: **Entomology** is the study of insects – from the Greek word entomos – “cut-up”, referring to the segmented body of the insect. Typically an insect has a head, a thorax, an abdomen, 2 antennae, 3 pairs of legs, and 1 or 2 pairs of wings. **Coleoptera** are the beetles and weevils of the insect world. It means “sheath-winged insects”, referring to the tough, horny front wings which serve as sheaths to protect the under wings used in flying. **Beetle** means “biter”. Beetles have strong jaws, well adapted to seizing and chewing their food. There is possibly one quarter of a million species of beetle in the world. The life of a beetle has four different stages: - the **egg**, which hatches into the **grub** or **larva**, which in turn sheds its skin and begins a period of rest as a **pupa**. The skin of the pupa splits and the winged adult **beetle** appears.

*'List of the Beetles of Ireland'* - is basically a report of a committee appointed by the Royal Irish Academy to investigate the flora and fauna of Ireland. Its introduction reveals that it is the first comprehensive list of Irish **coleoptera**. A man by the name of Alexander Haliday had done much work earlier in the century. It was not until 1887 however that “one of ourselves”, says the report, (might it have been Johnson?), “began to rescue Irish Coleoptera from the state of oblivion into which (it) had fallen”. The inception of the periodical, *'The Irish Naturalist'*, in 1892 stimulated rising interest. Tribute is paid to many people involved in the study – a remarkable number of them clergymen! The

report claims to catalogue 1630 species of beetle.



*The body parts of a beetle*

The names of the beetles in the list are all of course in scientific Latin, which means that, unless you are an expert, there is not much interest in reading it. However the report's bibliography is of interest, for reference is made to other reports, periodicals and journals, such as that of the Dublin Field Naturalists' Club, 1893, *'Coleoptera taken on the Newry Excursion'*. and in the same year, *'Cionus thrapsus and Quedius cruentus from Loughgilly'*, exhibited to a meeting of the same club in Dublin.

By far the most prolific contributor to the bibliography is W.F. Johnson himself. There are at least 48 articles from Johnson, which had been published between 1885 and 1900, many of them in the *'Irish Naturalist'*, from his days in Armagh and Acton Parish. For example: 1895, from the *'Entomological Monthly Magazine XXII'*, “*Strange locality for Carabus months*”, strange because it is very rare in Ireland (4 instances only); also in 1895, “*Dyschirius obscurus at Lough Neagh*”, confined to bare sand on Lough Neagh in Ireland; and in 1896 in the *'Irish Naturalist'*. “*Acherontia atropos (Death's Head moth) at Bessbrook, ...a fine example 5 inches across*”.

Even after his publication of the *'List'* Johnson continued to report his observations on all aspects of nature to various societies and journals. In the *'Irish Naturalist'* there are published many brief reports of Johnson's expeditions or rambles, which took place in the fields and lanes around this district. A picture springs to mind of Johnson crawling round the lawn at Acton glebe with a large magnifying glass in his hand. It may not be too far from the truth. Add a net for butterflies, moths, bees, wasps and dragonflies; and another for the denizens of the ponds, drains and sheuchs; some sort of satchel to carry his collecting boxes, phials and chemicals-, and. I imagine, a big broad-brimmed hat – and you have a

reasonably accurate picture of an enthusiast like Johnson.

## THE IRISH NATURALISTS' JOURNAL



### IRISH ENTOMOLOGY: THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS

by BRYAN P. BEIRNE

Here are some extracts from his reports in the period that Johnson was compiling his list: -

In addition to detailed accounts about **Coleoptera**, he makes observations about other species. Early in 1893 when he is living in Armagh, he mentions the first appearance that year of the small cabbage white butterfly in his garden, and remarks that Mrs. Johnson spotted an orange tip. Mrs. Johnson is regularly with her husband on his trips. Johnson declares: *"If the season goes on as it has begun, it should be a splendid insect year, and I hope the brethren of the net will keep their weather eye open for rarities."* He had such wide-ranging knowledge and interests. In response to someone who had found an unusual fern at Carlingford, he confesses that it is not indigenous there, but that he and his brother had actually planted a quantity of the fern on Carlingford Mountain. He regularly reports the arrival of migrating birds in the spring – the chiffchaff, the willow wren, the corncrake, the cuckoo and the swallow. He and his wife spot primroses in full bloom on Christmas Eve on the roadside between Poyntzpass and Acton.

A brief account of a visit to Lough Neagh where he explores a murky drain is most amusing: *"In went my water net, and when I drew it forth I gave a howl of delight (there was no one there but two young lady friends who were watching my operations with great interest, so my antics did not matter), for here were two Argyroneta aquatica... a somewhat rare spider. It lives under water, thus differing in its habits from other spiders"*. Subsequently Johnson put the rare

spiders into his aquarium and observed them daily from close range. On another occasion, finding himself without a net, he captures the common swift moth with his hat!

In 1895 there is an interesting note in the *'Irish Naturalist'*. Johnson is listed as the President of the Armagh Natural History and Philosophical Society. The members regret his departure from Armagh, but he says that *"as the parish of Acton to which he was going was not very far from Armagh, he will be happy to continue his connection with the Society."* A note appears in the same year: *"We were joined on our nocturnal rambles (by) the Rev. H Harper (then rector of Loughgilly)." They had been setting up lanterns to attract moths"*.

Moving to Acton glebe Johnson finds treasures in his garden and the surrounding countryside. *"I noticed this spring (1896) on one of the walks in my flower garden a plant very like Draba verna (Common Whitlow grass). It occurs also on the road between this and Poyntzpass, and also at the railway station"*. An interesting find was the Lunar Thom. *Selenia lunularia*, in the glebe grounds. Another comment: *"... there was a remarkable swarm of Dor beetles (dung beetles) at the railway station in Poyntzpass. They must have been in great numbers, for two boys brought me about 70... I can only suggest as the cause of their assemblage the quantity of cow dung left in the vicinity after the cattle fair"*. The same report mentions the arrival of *Pieris napi* (Green Veined White butterfly).

This remark is typical: (1896) *"I gathered a bag of moss from one of my fields"* - and he lists seven different species of beetle found in the moss. He finds yet more beetles *"in a hot-bed at Acton House; when digging in a drain at one of my fields; on the shore of the lake at Loughbrickland; in the lower demesne at Tanderagee"*, and *"in my garden"* where he captures *"Cucullia umbratica or Shark"*, and he declares, *"I hope as I become better acquainted with this locality to report more interesting captures"*.

Johnson is always on the search for more information and new discoveries. Reporting on a species of bee, *Bombus Smithianus*, found in his garden he says: *"I found a couple of very strong nests in my lawn when the hay was being cut. They were very fierce and chased me a considerable distance when disturbed. This appears to be the first record of their occurrence in Ireland"*. In his Entomology Notes from Poyntzpass in 1897 Johnson reports from *"the canal between Poyntzpass and Scarva"*, and mentions some specimens brought to him from Portrush by a young friend, others collected by his wife from the sand hills at Newcastle, and no less than 21 species taken from the moss in his fields. There is *"a great abundance of Pararge aegeria (Speckled Wood). It quite swarms in my garden, but just a couple of Vanessa atalanta (Red Admiral)"*. He also finds *"a nice Crocallis elingaria" (the Scalloped Oak Moth)"* which he records in his dairy, and various insects among the debris left by a haystack he had removed. Again,

bags of moss from the base of fir trees in a neighbouring wood provide “the usual complement of spiders, woodlice, millipedes, with a strong caterpillar or two, and a few handsome ichneumon flies, with various spring-tails”.

Some time later Johnson stops to collect yet more specimens “when driving between (Acton) and Tanderagee”. We find him “at Loughgilly on some marshy ground”, and “walking through a field belonging to Col. Alexander”. A particular beetle attracts his attention “in a pantry where oats and meal had been kept, and in my hen house”. He says, “I met with *Pristonychus terricola* which escaped the gallinaceous leak (he means the poultry droppings) only to fall victim to the cyanide bottle” - which, I assume, is used in the collecting and preserving of insects. He is attacked by bees once more in his garden and stung on the hand, and he sends off one of the nests to the Science and Art Museum. But he refers to the scarcity of wasps - even when his wife was making jam.

The various publications to which Johnson contributed reveal the extent of his interests and activities. After his retirement and second marriage at Rostrevor he continues to send regular accounts of discoveries in his new surroundings.

Johnson’s obituary appears, along with a photograph, in the ‘*Irish Naturalists*’ Journal of July 1934. In assessing the value of his work, it remarks that his intensive study of the ichneumon flies of his district was “probably his most important work”. It notes that “heart trouble prevented any active work in the field during the last few years”, and interestingly, it closes with the information that “in his younger days Johnson was a keen cricketer and was proud of the fact that he had once played at the Gloucester county ground in a match in which the famous brothers W.G. and E.M. Grace also took part”. His own account of his catching, during a cricket match, the first recorded Clouded Yellow butterfly in Armagh is humorously described in the ‘*British Naturalist*’, 1893.

The *British Naturalist* was carrying a series on prominent naturalists, and Johnson was one of the “*Naturalists of the Day*” in the April 1893 edition. He himself seems to have sent the information, and this is what it says: -

*“Irishmen, as a rule, appear to have an inborn love for Natural History.... In former times both Dean Swift and Oliver Goldsmith... showed themselves to be keen observers of Nature.... Of scientists proper Haliday may perhaps be quoted as of the first rank; but, coming to our own times, the Rev. W.F. Johnson, of Armagh, has done far more for the study in the sister isle than any one of the present day”.* It continues: “Mr. Johnson appears to have taken up the study of entomology early in life... in 1863 he commenced the collecting of Lepidoptera (i.e. at eleven years old). The only living specimen of *Colictis edusa* (variety of Clouded Yellow butterfly) ever seen at Armagh was captured in 1877. It appeared in the cricket field while a match was proceeding (Johnson describes it himself) ‘I had just finished bowling the over when I saw *Edusa* going at full speed across the field. Fortunately I had my net with me-, I seized it and set off at top speed after the butterfly.... I put on a tremendous spurt and came up with it just at the road. I struck at and caught it, but, missing my footing, rolled headlong into a ditch of nettles, amid loud applause from the school boys.”

Then follows an assessment of Johnson’s work: “In

*collecting coleoptera Mr. Johnson has added a considerable number of new species to the Irish List, and his efforts in this direction are the most meritorious inasmuch that he has to work almost alone, having no public collection wherewith to refer for the purpose of identifying his captures”.*



**Acton Church**

The *Newry Reporter* of 29 March 1934 records Johnson’s passing: “*Rostrevor Scientist’s Death. Passing of the Rev. W.F. Johnson, M.A. A noted entomologist*”. Johnson is described as “the great scholar and widely esteemed cleric”. He had died “after a short illness during which he had the devoted and unremitting care of his wife. His gentle and affectionate disposition and lovable personality combined with his rare scientific knowledge had claimed friendship from every walk in life and endeared him to all who were privileged to have the gift of his friendship. The great depth of his learning and the unassuming simplicity of his manner were outstanding characteristics of an outstanding personality...”

On 5 April 1934 the *Newry Reporter* printed details of Johnson’s funeral: -

*“Amid many manifestations of regret the remains of the late Rev. W.F. Johnson, M.A., were removed from his home on Saturday for interment at Poyntzpass... Members of the Orange Order... attended the funeral as a mark of respect to one who held the Order in high regard and had given useful service in Co. Armagh as WDM in years gone by. The Orange brethren assisted in carrying the remains from the house to the hearse in Rostrevor, and again at Poyntzpass.”* A large number of mourners is reported, and during the service in Acton Church, Johnson’s favourite hymn, “*Rock of Ages*” was sung, and “*The Sands of Time are sinking*” beautifully rendered by the choir.

William Frederick Johnson. teacher, pastor, entomologist, scientist cricketer, Orangeman - and friend. I close with some words from the introduction to the ‘*List of Beetles*’ of Ireland in 1902, which confirm that Johnson never tired in his passion, nor diminished in his enthusiasm for study and research in so many fields of Natural History. “*That further research will add many species to this list we have no doubt. It is impossible to tell what varieties and novelties may still be lurking in our mountains and bogs, our lakes and rivers, the reward of the future investigator — a charming and ever fresh subject*”.