

A Tribute to Rev. John Roberts

EMBRACING MY NEW FRIEND

BY MELISSA STRICKLER

The time I spend writing icons can be a lonely time, but in the best way. Madam Guyon (1648-1717), a writer and mystic once said, “I love the lonely creative hours with God.” If I could speak to Madam Guyon today, I would tell her I couldn’t agree more.

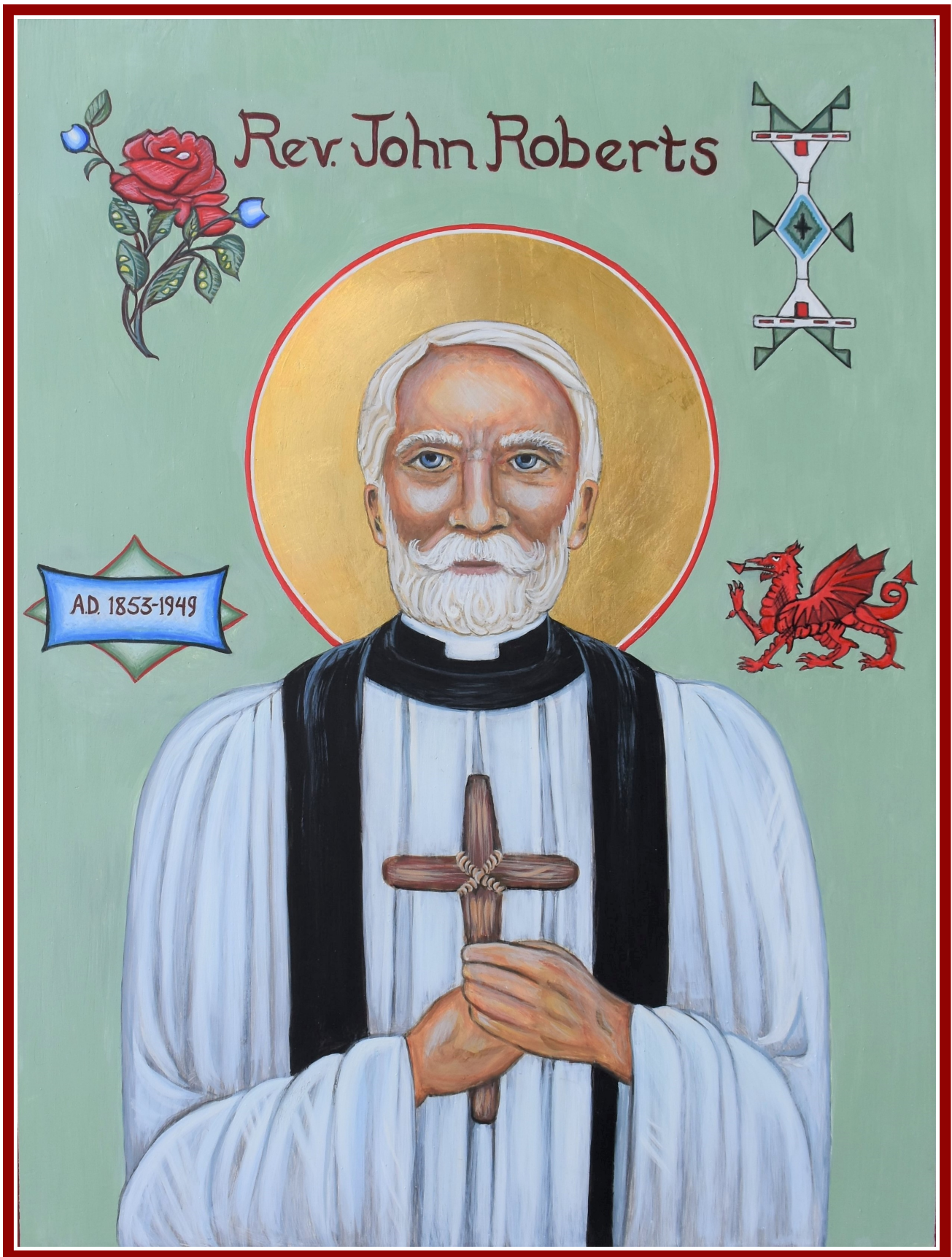
During the creative hours of writing an icon I am talking to the Lord. I start my day and end my day with a more formal icon prayer, but during the hours I sit before an icon creating, the talk is more casual. I talk to God about all who will view the icon, and that it will bless them in ways seen and unseen. I pray for those who will commission the icon, and their family now and generations to come. And since there are many hours involved, I pray for the struggles and pain in the world. I pray for the best representation of the figure or figures I am painting, so those venerating the icon will feel a connection. There is something that happens which is hard to explain, but basically, I also find a true connection.

When Bishop Chandler approached me about writing an icon of Rev. John Roberts, I happily accepted. I had heard many snippets about John Roberts since I moved to Lander, and he sounded like an amazing figure within the Episcopal Church and the Wind River Reservation. I wanted the icon to be him, really him, so I needed to get to know John. I took every photo Bishop Chandler sent me, and others that I’d located on the internet, and printed them out. I studied his face closely. I looked for distinctive characteristics throughout several decades, because no one photo tells our life story. I searched to see which side he parted his hair, how he groomed his mustache, his incredible cheekbones, the average length of his beard, and so on. As I was working on all the facial details, I was reading stories about him, getting to know him. Suddenly those snippets of greatness mattered little, because I was starting to know a man who loved Creator God.



Bishop Paul-Gordon Chandler, Rev. Roxanne Friday and artist Melissa Strickler at the John Roberts Festival.

John left his homeland of Wales and served other locations before arriving at the Wind River Reservation. John surely had thoughts of what it would be like on the Reservation, and how he would best serve and minister to the indigenous people. I write this because as someone who lived in the Middle East for a handful of years I thought I knew the direction God was leading me when my family arrived across the ocean. I was wrong. My time in the Middle East was full of lessons, and I met so many who shared their beliefs, and wanted to understand mine. I look back at that time of my life with beloved memories of my Muslim and Hindu friends.



An icon written by Melissa Strickler of Rev. John Roberts, 2022.
Wooden panel prepared with rabbit glue and marble dust gesso, and linen cloth.
Natural Shellac, 22 kt gold, ground earth pigments, egg yolk, wine, and water.

I have thought of the many traditions and beliefs John learned from the Native Americans, and all they learned from this Welsh Christian. Picturing the fusion of their knowledge and wisdom is really remarkable.

Occasionally there is something that will stump me as I work on an icon. One day as I was painting John's face I realized I didn't know the color of his eyes. The grainy black and white photos were not giving away any secrets. I looked at John's face and asked him to help me find the true color of his eyes. Options were slim, so I once again I went to the internet and Googled the common eye color of the Welsh people. Blue. So, I went with it. Immediately it felt right and I had a sense of peace as John's eyes looked back at me. Reassurance came to me during the 2022 John Roberts Festival when I spoke to his family and they told me they have blue eyes.

When I write an icon, one of the last steps is adding a rosy warm tone color to represent the blood that flows throughout the figure. John was called to Fremont County, to the Wind River Reservation to be a "Servant of God" for 66 years. I thought about the first time he must have seen Red Canyon, just outside of Lander - awed I am sure. So, I drove to Red Canyon and collected the red earth. I used the Red Canyon pigment to create the blood, the life in John's skin. I truly hope he would approve.

Besides the nimbus (halo), I often add gold throughout an icon, but for John Roberts I held back. No ornate decoration was needed for John: just a simple cross to represent his servitude to God. The rose left of his name on the icon is the symbol for the Eastern Shoshone tribe, and on the right of his name is the

symbol of the Red Road significant to the Northern Arapaho tribe. The red dragon represents John Roberts' roots. The red dragon is an ancient symbol for the Welsh, and is still on the flag of Wales today.

I did struggle with how I wanted Rev. Roberts' date of birth and death to be displayed. After numerous attempts, using full months, dates and years, I finally rested on what I thought he would have wanted, and that is what is on his headstone - simply A.D. 1853-1949.

On a glorious February blue sky day at St. David's on the Wind River Reservation, a festival took place in honor of Rev. John Roberts. As my husband and I turned down the lane toward the church, I imagined how many winter days John admired the Wind River Mountains from that same holy ground.

Toward the end of the celebration, the icon of Rev. John Roberts was blessed and cedared. Everyone listened to the blessing, while watching as an Eastern Shoshone elder pulled the smoke out of a bucket with an eagle feather guiding it up and around the icon. The cedaring of the icon is now permanently in the pores of the artwork. The writing of the icon is finished, and it will go out into the world to tell the story of this remarkable man. I've been asked if it's hard to see an icon leave my studio. My answer is always "No, because they were never mine anyway." I do know I've been blessed with a connection, a new friend, a friend named John.



Sacredness, content, and color are important to artist **Melissa Strickler**. Whether it be traditional iconography, or the more contemporary collage, she tells a story through each piece of art. As an artist and iconographer, the mediums in which she chooses to work are very different, but the journey she takes to achieve a meaningful piece of art is consistently the same. Originally from Colorado, and a few other moves along the way, including one expatriate locale, Melissa now calls Lander, Wyoming home. Her studio is nestled in the foothills of the Wind River Mountain Range. When Melissa is not making art, she can be found beekeeping or hanging with family and friends. Melissa is married with two grown children. For more information, see: sacredwindwyoming.com