

WHITE ROBE



The Story of the Sacred Journey
of the Rev. John Roberts among Native Americans

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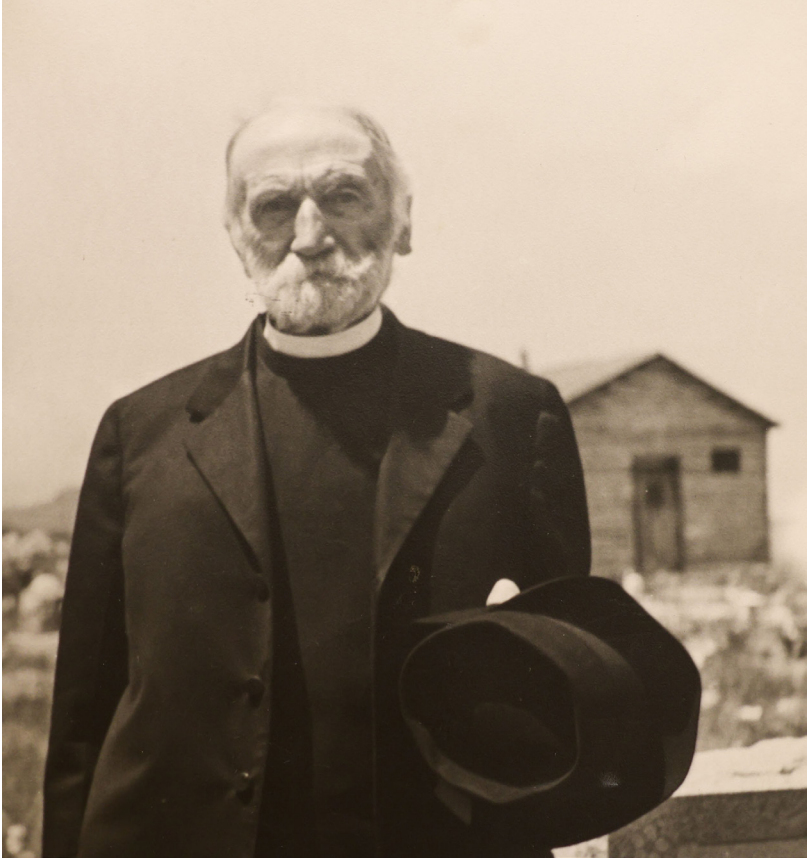
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The Rev. Dr. John Roberts (1853 - 1949)

WHITE ROBE

A contemporary art exhibition by celebrated Irish artist Brian Whelan on the life and work of the Rev. Dr. John Roberts of the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming

The US Federal Indian boarding schools were established to enculturate and assimilate Native Americans into white American culture, resulting in the suppression of Indigenous culture and languages. As the tragedies of these schools are coming to light, the life and work of the Rev. Dr. John Roberts stands out as an exemplary model of doing the opposite.

The acclaimed Irish artist Brian Whelan was commissioned by the Rt. Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler, the Episcopal Bishop of Wyoming, through *ArtSpirit* (the arts initiative of the Episcopal Church in Wyoming) and CARAVAN, an international arts non-profit, to produce 13 paintings about the life and work of Rev. John Roberts, the renowned Welsh Anglican priest who served among Native Americans on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming for 66 years (1883-1949).

This commissioned series of paintings premiered at the John Roberts Festival in Ft. Washakie, Wyoming on June 3, 2023, and embarked on an international exhibition tour, first to museums throughout Wyoming (beginning at the Pioneer Museum in

Lander, Wyoming), then to noted venues in the US and finally to England and Wales. Following the multi-year tour, the paintings will be on permanent display in Wyoming.

This unique exhibition premiered on the 140th anniversary of Rev. John Roberts' arrival on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, in 1883, where he served among the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho tribes. Beyond commemorating his extraordinary life and ministry, the exhibition also draws attention to the importance of learning from the spirituality, culture and traditions of our Native American sisters and brothers.



The Rev. John Roberts and Andrew Basil (grandson of Sacajawea) at the grave of Sacajawea, the Eastern Shoshone guide for the Lewis and Clark Expedition - Ft. Washakie, Wind River Reservation, WY

ABOUT THE REV. DR. JOHN ROBERTS

John Roberts was born in Wales in 1853, and while training for Anglican ordination felt called to serve among his Native American sisters and brothers in North America. Following a brief time of service within a leper colony in the Bahamas, he began his ministry on the Wind River Reservation in 1883. Not long after his arrival, he conducted the funeral for Sacajawea, who as a young Eastern Shoshone woman, was the remarkable guide on the renowned Lewis and Clark expedition. As a missionary-priest, Rev. Roberts was well ahead of his time, as he encouraged Native American expressions of spirituality and faith, embracing and honoring tribal culture and language, and traditional indigenous rituals and customs. He cultivated close friendships with tribal leaders, including the renowned Eastern Shoshone Chief Washakie and Northern Arapaho Chief Black Coal, and was referred to with deep affection as “White Robe” and “Elder Brother.” If there were negotiations with U.S. government officials, the tribes would not proceed without Rev. Roberts being present. His work led him, with the assistance of tribal leadership, to establish two alternative schools on sacred land gifted by the tribes that focused on honoring and preserving Indigenous culture. One of the schools is on the National Register of Historic Places today.

In addition to his ministry on the Wind River Reservation, he founded all the Episcopal churches among white settlers within a 150 mile radius, in

Fremont County - including the present-day Episcopal churches in Lander, Riverton, Thermopolis, Atlantic City, Morton, Crowheart and Dubois, and churches that no longer exist in Milford, Hudson and Shoshoni.

He lived a remarkable life and left a legacy that continues to have great influence today. He was awarded honorary doctorate degrees from the University of Wyoming and Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. Rev. Roberts died in 1949 at the age of 96, and the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho peoples honor his legacy to this day. Wyoming's state flag is flown at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. in his honor. *A Great Cloud of Witnesses*, a publication of the US Episcopal Church, honors him with a feast day on February 25.



The Rev. John Roberts with Henry Lee Tyler from the Northern Arapaho tribe

“It is my earnest desire to remain with the Indians permanently and to do what little I can for them spiritually and temporally.”

The Rev. John Roberts, May 2, 1886

ABOUT THE ARTIST



Brian Whelan grew up in London, of Irish parents. After his training at the Royal Academy of Arts, he lived and worked in the East Anglia area of England near the North Sea. His home and studio are now based in Connecticut, USA.

Known to combine the profundity of play with the intent of icons, his paintings have been exhibited in noted art spaces, cathedrals and religious institutions around the world - such as Washington National Cathedral and Villanova University of Pennsylvania in the USA, St. Martin-in-the-Fields, Trafalgar Square, London, St. Edmundsbury Cathedral and Norwich Cathedral in the U.K., and Parador Dos Reis Catolicos, Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Whelan's work follows in the tradition of East Anglian medieval narrative painting. For more information see: brianwhelanart.com

ROOTS

This painting highlights Rev. John Roberts' birth in Wales, and the influence of Celtic spirituality on his worldview, which led to him to encourage Native Indigenous expressions of spirituality. The painting celebrates Rev. Roberts' Celtic Welsh roots through the Welsh national flower of daffodils, a Celtic cross, the Welsh red dragon flag (a symbol of "fearlessness"), mid- 19th century Welsh hats and clothing, Celtic harp, and sheep in the countryside (i.e. Agnus Dei).

The Rev. John Roberts was born in Dyserth, Wales in 1853. In the latter half of the 19th century, virtually all teaching in Welsh schools was required to be in English, even in areas where the pupils barely understood English. The Welsh language was forbidden to be spoken in schools. Some schools used the Welsh Not, a piece of wood, often bearing the letters "WN", which was hung around the neck of any pupil caught speaking Welsh. The pupil could pass it on to any schoolmate heard speaking Welsh, and the pupil wearing it at the end of the day would be punished. The subjugation of his own culture and language in his home country, led him to advocate for the preservation of Native Indigenous cultures and languages.

BRIAN WHELAN

Roots, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
24"x 12"



CALLING

This painting commemorates Rev. John Roberts' calling both to the priesthood and to work with Native Americans, at his ordination to Holy Orders (Diaconate) at Litchfield Cathedral in England in 1878 by the renowned bishop, The Rt. Rev. George Augustus Selwyn, the first Anglican Bishop of New Zealand and Melanesia.

BRIAN WHELAN

Calling, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
24"x 12"



PREPARATION

Newly ordained, Rev. John Roberts was sent to The Bahamas to work in a leper colony. He was ordained a priest at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Nassau, where he also served as Chaplain, and met his future wife Laura Alice Brown, who was the organist.

BRIAN WHELAN

Preparation, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
24"x 12"



ARRIVAL

The Rev. John Roberts' arrival in Wyoming to serve on the Wind River Reservation coincided with the Great Blizzard of 1883. Arriving in Green River on February 2, 1883 with his dog, he took a harrowing journey to Ft. Washakie on the Reservation with a US postman in minus 60 degrees F. The 150 mile trip took eight days instead of the usual 36 hours.

BRIAN WHELAN

Arrival, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
24"x 12"



FAMILY

On December 24, 1884, Rev. John Roberts' fiancée, Laura Alice Brown, arrived in Rawlins, Wyoming. She had followed him from The Bahamas after being separated for several years. They were married the next day, on Christmas, and then set off together for the Wind River Reservation by stage coach. Not long after, they lost their first child, a little boy, who died at birth. They went on to raise five children, four daughters and a son.

BRIAN WHELAN

Family, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
24"x 12"



SACAJAWEA

Early in Rev. John Roberts' ministry on the Wind River Reservation, he conducted the funeral for Sacajawea, who as a young Eastern Shoshone woman, had been the acclaimed guide on the renowned Lewis and Clark expedition in the early 1800s. In this painting, red roses are being offered at her funeral, the symbol of the Eastern Shoshone.

BRIAN WHELAN

Sacajawea, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
24"x 12"



CHIEF WASHAKIE'S GIFT

The Rev. John Roberts developed close friendships with tribal leaders, especially the renowned Eastern Shoshone Chief Washakie, as well as the Northern Arapaho Chief Black Coal. Chief Washakie gifted him 160 acres of sacred land to be used for a church and a school for girls. Chief Washakie asked to be baptized by Rev. Roberts at the end of his life.

In this painting, wild flowers surround the school building, as a coyote, a mythical symbol to Native Americans, makes an appearance.

BRIAN WHELAN

Chief Washakie's Gift, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
24"x 12"



WHITE ROBE

The Rev. John Roberts was affectionately referred to as “White Robe” by the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho tribes because as a priest he wore a white robe. These were the tragic days of untold treaty after treaty with the Native tribes being broken by the US government. Hence during any negotiations with government officials, the tribes would not proceed without Rev. John Roberts being present.

In this symbolic painting, Rev. John Roberts is pictured with Chief Washakie and President Grover Cleveland, as he helps represent the tribes in negotiations. In the background, US Army officials rip up treaties.

BRIAN WHELAN

White Robe, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
24”x 12”



HERITAGE

The Rev. John Roberts began his service on the Wind River Reservation as a schoolmaster for the Federal School, but was deeply disturbed with many of their rules, and the resulting tragic consequences for Native children. Therefore, he founded a school for girls, where he encouraged them to embrace their Indigenous customs, traditions, and languages, and worked to facilitate close family relations. At the school, he built a permanent wood teepee for the children to celebrate and practice their traditions, strengthen their cultural heritage, learn their handicrafts (i.e. beading), practice their dances, and celebrate their music (i.e. sacred drumming, etc.), all the while encouraging the use of their tribal language.

BRIAN WHELAN

Heritage, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
24"x 12"



CHURCHES

On the Wind River Reservation, Rev. John Roberts encouraged Indigenous expressions of spirituality in following the way of Christ (i.e. sacred drumming, Native terminologies for God, etc.), and oversaw the translation of parts of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer into the languages of Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho. In addition to his work on the Reservation, he founded all of the Episcopal churches in Fremont County, Wyoming, which served white settlers. He rode thousands of miles on his beloved buckskin horse from church to church.

This painting highlights the Bible translation work. At the foot of the table, the effort is being cedared, as sacred drumming is played. Some of those who assisted Rev. Roberts in the translation work are shown around the table, including Michael White Hawk, Fremont Arthur, Charles Lajoe, Herbert Walsh and the Northern Arapaho priest, the Rev. Sherman Coolidge.

BRIAN WHELAN

Churches, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
24"x 12"



THE GOOD RED ROAD

“Elder Brother” was the name of honor and affection used by the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho tribes in referring to Rev. Roberts. He was deeply loved and respected by those he came to serve. He was seen by them as following and teaching “the Good Red Road,” a reference to the Indigenous way of thinking about how Creator originally intended us to live.

In this painting, Rev. Roberts sets out on a journey under Sister Moon, as an Eastern Shoshone mother and her daughter bless him with their send-off greeting.

BRIAN WHELAN

The Good Red Road, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
24”x 12”



TRIBUTE

The Rev. John Roberts was honored during his lifetime by the US Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion around the world as a beloved missionary-priest. He was awarded honorary doctorate degrees from the University of Wyoming and Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. He died on January 22, 1949 at the age of 96, and is buried in a simple grave in Lander, Wyoming with the epitaph "Servant of God." The Wyoming state flag is flown today in his honor at Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. He is also commemorated in *A Great Cloud of Witnesses*, an Episcopal Church publication, with a feast day on February 25.

In this painting, the Wyoming state flag flies high in his honor at Washington National Cathedral, Washington, D.C.

BRIAN WHELAN

Tribute, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
24"x 12"



SERVANT OF GOD

This painting highlights different aspects of the remarkable life and ministry of Rev. John Roberts. Rev. Roberts is shown baptizing in the Wind River that is filled with fish, a symbol of following the way of Christ. The salmon in the river also remind us of the renewal of life that came about to so many, both Indigenous and white, as a result of his work. The horse represents strength, and the coyote's presence reminds us of the spiritual nature of his service. The little prairie dog symbolizes cooperation, community, and kinship, which describes his work with his Native brothers and sisters. There are two eagles flying in the air, the strongest and bravest of all birds, which Native Americans have chosen as a symbol of what is highest, bravest, strongest and holiest. In the Native American culture, eagle feathers are given to another in honor, and the feathers are worn with dignity and pride.

BRIAN WHELAN

Servant of God, 2023

Mixed media: acrylics, foil, varnish on stretched canvas
48"x 36"







“A man more devoted to his work cannot be found in the whole Anglican Church today. Mr. Roberts is a man of culture, a man of apostolic devotion. He is doing a work worthy of the past heroes of the Church utterly unconscious of doing anything great. His name will live on as a...pioneer of the faith. He holds a very unique place in the hearts and affections of the people of Wyoming. He is known from one end to the other of [this] great state, for there is scarcely a place where, at one time or another, he has not gone to lend the ever helping hand to those in trouble or distress. Distinguished people all over the state do him honor. Such pioneering as John Roberts has exemplified can never be duplicated in Wyoming. The volumes that can be written of such a life!”

Words spoken by The Rt. Rev. Ethelbert Talbot, the first Bishop of Wyoming and Idaho, and the 15th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, about the Rev. John Roberts, at the 1888 Pan-Anglican Conference (now called the Lambeth Conference) to all the Anglican bishops around the world at that time.

CURATOR



The Rt. Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler

*Bishop of the Episcopal Church
in Wyoming and Founder of
CARAVAN, a global arts initiative*

Bishop Paul-Gordon Chandler grew up in Senegal, West Africa, and has lived and worked extensively around the world in senior leadership roles within publishing, the arts, relief and development and The Episcopal Church. An author, art curator, and social entrepreneur, he is passionate about using the arts to further our global quest for a more harmonious future, both with each other and with the earth.

He is the Founder of CARAVAN, an international arts non-profit/NGO, recognized as a leader in using the arts to transform our world. He has organized and curated major art exhibitions around the world, in sacred spaces such as St. Paul's Cathedral in London and National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. and at notable art venues like the National Gallery of Fine Arts in Amman, Jordan, the American University Museum in Washington, D.C., Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery, Museum of Modern Art in Cairo, Egypt, as well as at reverential memorial sites like Ground Zero in New York. For more information see: paulgordonchandler.com.

ORGANIZERS



The Arts Initiative of the Episcopal Church in Wyoming

ArtSpirit is the arts initiative of the Episcopal Church in Wyoming. *ArtSpirit* explores and nurtures the relationship between spirituality and the arts, by developing, curating, coordinating and hosting artistic initiatives to stimulate discussion, dialogue and education, as well as spiritual exploration, toward enhancing our experience and understanding of both the Transcendent and of each other.



Transformation through the Arts

CARAVAN, an international arts NGO/non-profit, is recognized as a global leader in using the arts to further our global quest for a more harmonious future, both with each other and with the earth. CARAVAN's mission is based on the belief that the arts can be one of the most effective mediums to heal our world and to creatively foster peace, harmony, wholeness and health in all its forms. For more information on CARAVAN see: oncaravan.org

**“God’s footsteps are not
known. His paths are in
the Great Waters. But we
trust Him so to follow Him
until the day breaks and the
shadows flee away.”**

The Rev. John Roberts

