

Native American "Informants": The Contribution of Francis La Flesche¹

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For many years it has been acknowledged that American Indian cultures, as subject matter, have played a unique role in shaping the development of American anthropology. The backyard scientific laboratory afforded by the expanding United States frontier offered different opportunities for research from those generally available in Europe. It is less often recognized that living representatives of these cultures played an extremely active role in preserving them. Without them, American anthropology as we know it would never have taken shape. The Native American informants who worked with outsiders at recording the traditions of their forebears for posterity often went on to become independent scholars; and even those who did not proved vitally important in compiling a priceless record. It seems fitting at a meeting devoted to the history of American anthropology to bring these people to mind: awareness is in fact rapidly growing (see Hertzberg 1971: 305; Sanders 1973: 236ff). We will consider some general background first and then the contribution of one man whose work was outstanding; Francis La Flesche of the Nebraska Omaha.

The range of Indian personalities represented by "informants" is as tremendous as the range of publications in which their work appears. By now, there are great literary figures; Ishi of the Yana of California (Kroeber 1961) and Don Talayesva of the Hopi (Simmons 1942), whose memoirs in *Sun Chief* have achieved undergraduate fame (fairly or otherwise) as a sort of Indian version of *Portnoy's Complaint*. There is Black Elk, the Oglala Sioux, whose recollections (Neihardt 1932) in a new paperback edition were endorsed a few years ago by *The Whole Earth Catalog*. I am told this set off an avalanche of orders which nearly broke down the University of Nebraska Press. Other subjects and books are nearly as famous; *Crashing Thunder* (Radin 1926, 1963), *Mountain Wolf Woman* (Lurie 1961), *Son of Old Man Hat* (Dyk 1938, 1967), and *Two Leggings* (Nabokov 1967) to name a few. They are all selling, even the works of a few impostors who need not be named here (consult Costo 1972: 153-155 and the *New York Times*, March 11-25, 1972, for documentation of some of the controversy involved).

There is another whole group, however -- less well known although at least as important. This includes Indians who worked as interpreters and/or research assistants, gathering information as well as providing it. Joseph Casagrande's book *In the Company of Man* (1960) is instructive here. Of six North American informants in a series of twenty sketches by anthropologists, five served as the major source; 1) the Eskimo, Ohnainook; 2) the Ojibwa, John Mink; 3) the Navajo, Little Schoolboy; 4) the Pueblo, Marcus Tofoya; and 5) the Seminole, Josie Billy (Carpenter, Casagrande, Kluckhohn, Adair, and Sturtevant, respectively, in Casagrande 1960). The sixth, James Carpenter, was distinct, going ahead on his own to conduct independent investigations of Crow

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language and culture which he reported back to Robert Lowie for twenty years from his reservation home in Montana. This is the kind of involvement characteristic of Boas's assistant George Hunt, Grinnell's assistant George Bent, and a host of others. A survey of seventy-five anthropologists and historians in the summer of 1974 yielded a list of more than one hundred such persons as candidates for intellectual biographies, and the list is still growing (Sturtevant and Liberty 1974: 6-9). Beyond these, a recent bibliography of life histories includes more than 150 titles about, if not in collaboration with, Indian sources (Langness 1965: 54-82), and there is a more recent compilation (Hirschfelder 1973) summarizing the works of Indian and Eskimo authors.

Francis La Flesche (1857-1932) remains an outstanding member of this group. He belonged to a remarkable Omaha family: one memorialized by a special exhibit at the Nebraska Historical Society Museum in Lincoln, and in recent works of biography and fiction (Green 1969, Wilson 1974). His father, Joseph La Flesche, (in the Omaha dialect, "Estamanza" or Iron Eye), though half French, was one of the last traditional Omaha chiefs (a post achieved in part through his adoption as a son by the famous chief, Big Elk). A daughter, Susette -- better known as Bright Eyes -- became nationally famous on an eastern tour seeking land allotment. Beautiful and articulate, she was credited -- wrongly -- with having inspired Longfellow's *Minnehaha*. Another daughter, Susan, became a physician -- remarkable at that time for any woman, and doubly so for an Indian. Their brother Francis, however, claimed the greatest achievement by recording the cultural heritage of his people and of the related Osage to the south.

La Flesche was born in 1857, three years after the Omaha reservation was established on the west bank of the Missouri River. His mother, too, was half white. Despite increasing numbers of settlers crowding in around them, the Omahas retained, for a time, much of their old culture. They had been savagely battered by epidemics (three in half a century) and in the 1850s numbered fewer than a thousand; but they continued to hunt buffalo for twenty years, camping in tepees each summer in traditional clan formation. Earth lodges remained in winter use, though Iron Eye discouraged them and built wooden houses in his own village, dubbed that of the "Make Believe White Men." Young Francis took part in the buffalo hunts, serving at fifteen as one of the runners sent to locate the herd, and covering on that occasion some one hundred miles in eighteen hours (Alexander 1933: 328). During this same time he attended the Presbyterian Mission school above the Missouri River, an experience immortalized in his later book *The Middle Five*.

La Flesche had also been exposed to Omaha religion (though perhaps not all of it, as later described by Reo Fortune). He had acted the role of the Sacred Child in the Wawan ceremony, a peacemaking ritual in which he was profoundly moved by the music of several hundred massed voices (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 386, 389). He was also impressed with the importance of the Sacred Pole, a major medicine object. His horses ran over and nearly upset its belabored keeper (who was carrying it along on his back during the summer migration.) A special offering set matters right, but La Flesche took particular interest in the Sacred Pole from then on, eventually enabling its transfer to the Peabody

Museum. The story is dramatic. There was a meeting in September, 1888, between the Pole custodian, Yellow Smoke, and La Flesche, his father Iron Eye, and Alice Fletcher. Sacred traditions of the Pole were recited, and a solemn transfer ritual took place. Iron Eye (who had in the past opposed Pole-related reverence and ritual) became ill at once, and he died two weeks later in the same room (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 224). The effect of this tragedy upon La Flesche is not known, but it must have been disturbing with other Omahas surely blaming him for his father's death.

Nearly ten years earlier (in 1879) he had gone East with his sister Susette and the Ponca chief Standing Bear to plead (among other things) for secure allotment of land to individuals; a journey arousing tremendous national interest (see Jackson 1881). For the most part, he remained in the East for the rest of his life, working as a copyist for the Office of Indian Affairs (1880-1910) and later as an ethnologist at the Smithsonian. He continued with the BAE for eighteen more years, retiring in 1929. He died in Nebraska three years later, at the age of seventy-five.

La Flesche's work was closely tied to that of Alice Fletcher, with whom he collaborated for forty years – until her death in 1923. They made a strange pair: the energetic “Lady from Boston” so determined to record Plains culture and to bring about individual land allotment (later recognized as a colossal mistake) and the earnest young Omaha whom she eventually adopted as a foster son (Green 1969: 65ff; Lurie 1966: 81-84). La Flesche's contribution was critical: through him, access was obtained to areas of myth and ritual which would never have been available to an outsider. Continuing to visit the reservation and through the aid of his father and other kinsmen, he gathered increasingly sensitive data: the ritual of the Sacred Tent of War in 1884, the Sacred Pole in 1888, eventually the secret societies. Only La Flesche's intimate personal knowledge of the Omaha language made such recording possible. In a day before ethnology used participant observation, the participation of such insiders as collectors of information was indispensable to preserve a record for the Nebraska Omahas' descendants, a record which elsewhere has been lost.

And the record was considerable. *The Omaha Tribe*, included in the 27th Annual Report of the BAE and published in 1911, contained 642 pages, more than half of which were devoted to the technical areas of kinship and religion. The rest ranged from history to political organization and warfare, economic life, music and recent reservation development. Authorship was shared; Fletcher may have done more of the actual writing (Alexander 1922: 399). But La Flesche was forging ahead on pursuits of his own. These included an autobiography of his early years, *The Middle Five*; and more importantly perhaps, enormous labor among a cognate Siouxan-speaking group, the Osage eventually published in more than 1600 pages of ethnography.

The Middle Five combined an Omaha version of Victorian prose with episodes and insights which are purely Indian. It describes La Flesche's school years in the mid-1800s at the Presbyterian Mission when he was between the ages of eight to twelve. Some of it reads like a cross between *Huckleberry Finn* and *Little Men*. For example, we are given this description of a fight (p 110):

The Ponca made a determined resistance. I cannot very well relate what happened around me, for I was engaged in a lively bout with a impish looking little chap for whom I had taken a sudden and unreasonable spite. It was hard to get at him, for he was quick as a wildcat in his movements and he gave me a number of vicious blows ...

But there are also passages of real emotional power, especially in the last chapter describing the death of his beloved friend, Brush, of some alien disease -- probably TB. And the book stands as a classic vignette of the early days of missionary education, when the use of the native language was forbidden, and pressure for assimilation in all other ways was at its height.

His interest had been stimulated by the visit of an Osage delegation to Washington, some years after 1900. The delegation included a man named Saucy Calf; he and La Flesche discovered vast areas of shared intellectual interests. When asked if there was an Omaha Corn Song, La Flesche sang it. Saucy Calf encouraged La Flesche to pursue studies of the Osage at the reservation; he also visited his friend in Washington. Saucy Calf died in 1912 but his contribution to the effort was immense. The eventual reputation of the work as "the most complete single record of the ceremonies of any North American Indian people" is well deserved (Alexander 1933: 329; La Flesche in 45th Annual Report 1928: 530-536).

With this example in mind we can move to some more general questions concerning the role of those Indian intellectuals who helped to shape American anthropology. We can distinguish, initially, the two types suggested above (although of course there are some overlaps): the classical "informants" or sources on one hand, and the more independent researchers on the other. What sort of background factors directed people toward these roles? Was marginality a factor? Certainly, many of the well-known Indians were exceptional in some way (cf. Barnett's *Innovation*) -- by virtue of high intelligence if nothing else. Then, what about heredity? Mixed Indian and white ancestry appears to have been critical in many cases. The mixed blood interpreters deserve special study, having a place of their own in American history. Many went on to become active collectors of knowledge. Born of white fathers and Indian mothers, they generally remained predominantly Indian, often having unusual advantages in education. Exposure to different ways of life through membership in two societies seems to have been crucial in developing insight into cultural differences and the vital questioning process which led to so many anthropological discoveries. Full-bloods conversely may have remained more traditional. Perhaps they served more as sources (e.g. Ishi, Talayesva, and Black Elk), while the mixed bloods tended to become more independent and analytical as time went by (e.g. George Bent, George Hunt, and Francis La Flesche). It has been suggested, however, that this dichotomy, if it works anywhere, works best on the Plains, and even there it is far from perfect. My Cheyenne friend, John Stands In Timber, was certainly an independent researcher, and he was as full-blooded as they come.

For whatever reasons, it seems clear that too many of these people have received too little credit. Too many are mentioned briefly if at all in some author's preface, with only a note of thanks. It is time to give credit where credit is due.

Also, in passing, we might consider our own focus in recording material for the future. We have so often been obsessed with upstreaming -- gathering material from the vanishing past -- that we neglect the equally vanishing present. We seem to be supporting the adage that the only good Indian is a dead Indian. There have been comments to this effect with reference to the forthcoming biographical volume of the new Smithsonian Handbook of North American Indians: you have to be dead to get in. Some very worthwhile figures may not make it. More seriously, however, it seems the La Flesches of the present -- and there are some -- should be encouraged to record their own life stories while there is time. (John Stands in Timber wouldn't do it until he had finished his historical material, and by that time he had gone to join the "good" Indians.) The present counts as much as the past, nonetheless, as part of a vital human record. In the words of a recent popular song, "These Are the Good Old Days."

In closing, I would like to turn again to the story of Francis La Flesche, who had difficulties with stereotypes. One of these concerned the acceptance for publication of his book, *The Middle Five*. The manuscript was rejected twice with high praise of its literary quality, accompanied by the complaint that it was not "Indian" enough, but rather too typical of schoolchildren everywhere. Ironically, in stressing its common humanity, he had dedicated it "To the Universal Boy" (Green 1969: 189-191).

A second instance of such irony may be found in La Flesche's obituary (Alexander 1933). It seems that, during his Bureau of American Ethnology period, he was persuaded to pose one day for some photographs. The results, showing him in standard white-collar office attire, are preserved in the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian Institution. In the last of the series, however, he is wrapped in a buffalo robe over his shirt and tie.

After his death in 1932, a portrait was needed to accompany the obituary prepared by Hartley Burr Alexander for the *American Anthropologist*. The buffalo robe shot was selected, but apparently the clash of cultures suggested therein was too great for the layout editor to bear. By some process -- I am told that airbrushing was not a common photographic technique in 1933 -- a unique job of censorship took place. All evidence of street clothes was removed from beneath the buffalo robe. And we have a benignly smiling La Flesche posed for posterity in a getup which, had he seen, would surely have astonished him.

I am not sure of the moral of this story, -- except perhaps that stereotypes of Indians are as bad as any other kind, and at least as prevalent (if not more so). An Indian can be a great scientist, as was La Flesche, while remaining Indian in other dimensions. The combinations are potentially infinite. And a man ought to be permitted to wear a buffalo robe over his street clothes in his obituary if there is any indication whatever that this is what he might have wanted.

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