Section One: La Flesche’s early life

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*.

Reflection Prompts:
1. What did your group learn about the Omahas’ culture?
2. How were they influenced by white settlers?
3. What was the village of “Make Believe White Men”?
4. How was La Flesche’s life influenced by his native culture and the beliefs of educators?
Section Two: La Flesche's later life and writing

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.

Reflection Prompts:
1. Who was Alice Fletcher? How was she involved in La Flesche’s life?
2. What is so important about La Flesche’s writing?
Section Three: Native American writing today

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).

Reflection Prompts:
1. What is the author’s argument in the first paragraph? Do you think she has a point?
2. Why did La Flesche have a hard time getting The Middle Five published?
3. To whom did La Flesche dedicate The Middle Five? Why might he have chosen to focus on the story’s universality?
Section Four: La Flesche’s obituary and stereotypes

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.

Reflection Prompts:
1. Summarize the story the author shares here.
2. Why would she choose to conclude this article with such a story?
3. Do you agree that stereotypical views/portrayals of Native Americans are harmful? Explain your thinking.