

The Mission Education of Francis La Flesche: An American Indian Response to the Presbyterian Boarding School in the 1860s

By Michael C. Coleman

Univeristy of Jyväskylä, Finland

Only in the last two decades have scholars seriously attempted to examine Indian responses to Christian missions. Yet practitioners of the "new Indian mission history" have paid relatively little attention to the Indian children who attended schools established by the many religious societies in the nineteenth century.¹ At least one ex-student of a Presbyterian boarding school has left a detailed and frank account of his experiences. During the 1860's Francis la Flesche, an Omaha, attended the school run by the Board of Foreign Missions (BFM) of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA) in the Eastern Nebraska reservation of his tribe. *The Middle Five: Indian Boys at School* (1900), tells of five young friends who made up a gang between the older and younger students. This book provides an invaluable, if at times surprisingly positive Indian perspective on the mission school experience. It demonstrates that, for all its rigid discipline, the school was not a prison for the young Indians; neither was it the harmonious Christian family hoped for by the BFM. *The Middle Five* indicates the diverse, ambivalent, and adaptive responses of the pupils; their defiance and even manipulation of the teachers. La Flesche's classic account both reinforces yet questions a major contention of the "new Indian mission history."²

After almost two centuries of intensifying contact with French, English, and, especially, American civilizations, the Siouan-speaking Omahas retained much of their aboriginal lifestyle into the 1860's. They cultivated maize and other crops, yet each summer left their earthlodge villages for the tribal buffalo hunt. The people, according to La Flesche