



VITA: Alice Fletcher

Activist anthropologist: 1838-1923

by Joan Mark

Alice Cunningham Fletcher began her career in anthropology at the age of 43, after teaching school for several years, dabbling in journalism, and doing public speaking for a variety of causes, including temperance, the antitobacco movement, and feminism. While gathering information for a series of "Lectures on Ancient America," she made the acquaintance of Frederic Ward Putnam, the energetic, young director of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard. Putnam encouraged her not simply to report on what others were doing in the new science of anthropology, but to take up the work herself. The opportunity was not long in coming. In 1881, in Boston, she met two young Omaha Indians, Francis and Susette La Flesche, the children of a prominent chief, who were traveling through the East trying to raise support for the Indian cause. That fall Fletcher traveled with them to Nebraska, to live for six months with the Indians.

This gentle but intrepid Victorian soon found herself in a world she could not have imagined: she traveled eight hundred miles in an open wagon, suffered "fire and flood," and was carried across rapid rivers on the backs of Indians. "I have taken such a 'header into barbarism' . . . as I would not advise any lady to attempt," she wrote to Putnam on November 7, 1881.

Fletcher found the Omahas troubled by the threat of removal to the Indian Territory, and helped some of the Omaha men write a petition to Congress asking for legal titles to their farms. When no answer came from Washington, she went herself to present their case. Subsequently she was appointed by the United States Indian commissioner to carry out the provisions of the 1882 act that divided up the Omaha reservation into individual allotments of land.

The allotment work gave Fletcher an almost unprecedented opportunity to come to know Indian life. She registered every man, woman, and child in the tribe, learned their system of relationship, and recorded their customs. Because the Omahas were grateful for her help, she was allowed to learn the details of many secret ceremonies among the Omaha and neighboring tribes:

It was long before I was trusted with the facts. . . . It required much persuasion to be allowed to write down the music or obtain permission to tell "the white people." The unvarying reply was: "The white people do not understand us; they laugh at our sacred things; and they will laugh at these things which they did not know before." I pled that the laugh came from

ignorance and a better understanding would secure better treatment. On these terms I obtained consent to make public many of the facts set forth . . . for, although a close observer I was not a spy among my trusting friends.

With the Omaha allotments behind her, Fletcher emerged as a leader in the growing campaign for a change in federal Indian policy, which culminated in the Dawes Act of 1887. Its goal was the assimilation of Indians into white society and the breaking up of the reservations as rapidly as possible. Although Fletcher had a keen appreciation of the Indian way of life, she believed it was necessarily over, since the buffalo, on which many aspects of Plains Indian life depended, were gone. She and other reformers were convinced that the Indians could hold on to their land only by owning and working it as the whites did and by adopting other aspects of white "civilization," including bank accounts and education in English. After the Dawes Act passed, Fletcher was appointed to make land allotments to the Winnebagos and the Nez Percés, but the task proved to be more than she had bargained for, because many of the Nez Percés were opposed to the breaking up of their reservation. Fletcher persisted in what she continued to believe was in their best interest, but when the job was done, she accepted with relief a fellowship established for her at the Peabody Museum.

By virtue of the fellowship, Fletcher became the first woman to have an official, if somewhat irregular, appointment at Harvard. She continued, however, to live in Washington with a friend, the photographer E. Jane Gay, and with Francis La Flesche, whom she had informally adopted as her son. In 1911 Fletcher and La Flesche completed *The Omaha Tribe*, the classic ethnography on which they had been working for 29 years. The volume remains one of the most important studies of a single American Indian tribe ever published, exemplifying the "new method" of anthropological investigation, in which anthropologists, instead of relying on the casual accounts of travelers, missionaries, and military men, went to live with the people they wished to study. Among white Americans in the nineteenth century, only Frank Hamilton Cushing, who moved in with the Zuni Indians in New Mexico in 1879 and stayed for four and a half years, had as comprehensive an understanding of the culture of a single Indian people as Fletcher came to have of the Omahas.

During her lifetime Fletcher was a famous woman, the Margaret Mead of her day, honored for her philanthropic and scientific endeavors. Posterity has dealt harshly with her, in part because of the failure of the allotment program for which she fought. Yet, she tried to help a people whose way of life she respected—and recorded, in order that their descendants might some day know "the way in which their fathers walked." □

Joan Mark, a fellow of Harvard's Charles Warren Center and a research associate in the history of anthropology at the Peabody Museum, is presently at work on a biography of Alice Fletcher.

Opposite: Crayon portrait of Alice Fletcher, by F. H. Miller, 1888. From Harvard's Peabody Museum.