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Review of *Susan La Flesche Picotte, M.D.: Omaha Indian Leader and Reformer* By Benson Tong

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Susan La Flesche Picotte, M.D.: Omaha Indian Leader and Reformer. By Benson Tong. Foreword by Dennis Hastings. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xix + 285 pp. \$29.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

This first full-length biography of Susan La Flesche Picotte represents an important contribution to Great Plains and Native American studies. Tong is an accomplished cultural historian, carefully outlining the cultural and historical contexts, both nationally and regionally, for Picotte's short but accomplished life. Born, as Hastings points out, "into the Omaha Nation in a tepee in 1865," La Flesche Picotte became the first American Indian woman to become a physician (1889) and then spent most of her adult life working among the Omahas as physician, temperance reformer, religious missionary, and land claims advocate. She died 16 September 1916, at the young age of fifty. A dedicated and intelligent woman, La Flesche Picotte's writings have yet to be "recovered" by contemporary historians, a situation that won't hold for long.

Tong's treatment of La Flesche Picotte is thoughtful insofar as he consistently characterizes her as a "cultural mediator, or broker" and interprets much of her complicated entanglements with Eastern reform groups like the Women's National Indian Association, the Connecticut Indian Association, and the Indian Rights Association as part and parcel of the mixed associations in which educated Indians of the late nineteenth century would have to engage in order to gain any measure of sympathy, respect, money, or influence for their people. The book's first four chapters are generally chronological, beginning with a

brief history of the Omahas and an articulation of La Flesche Picotte's familial structure (chapter 1), moving into a general description of what La Flesche Picotte's life might have been like as a child (chapter 2), and on to a more specific description of her experiences as a student at the Hampton Institute (1884-1886) and her subsequent experiences at the Women's Medical College in Pennsylvania (1886-1889). The final four chapters of the book are less chronological and more topical, moving through particular areas of work that would occupy La Flesche Picotte for the rest of her life—physician at the Omaha agency (chapter 5), temperance worker and missionary (chapter 6), advocate for the Omahas in the wake of the Dawes Act and its complications for Native land claims and inheritance (chapter 7), and public health advocate (chapter 8). Though these phases are roughly chronological, they also overlap, and this leads to one of the problems with the book—the reader's difficulty in getting a clear picture of the duties that La Flesche Picotte might have been attending to in any given span of time. For example, not until one finishes the volume is it possible to realize that in the year after her husband, Henry Picotte, died (1907), La Flesche Picotte was dealing with the arrival of the Peyote Church among the Omahas, helping to formulate the Thurston County Medical Society, serving on the Walthill health board, fighting with the Office of Indian Affairs about her husband's allotment lands in South Dakota, helping other Omahas fight their own land claims problems with the OIA, serving as a missionary and leading services at Blackbird Hills Church, and working as a temperance advocate.

Great biographers make their subjects seem almost real to their readers, imbuing the contexts of a subject's life and the details provided through archival research with the sense that a whole person lives behind the words on the page. Tong's book doesn't accomplish this task. We come away knowing what Susan La Flesche Picotte was—an educated, acculturated, "living between

worlds” turn of the century American Indian woman—but having little idea of *who* she was. All in all, Tong’s representation of La Flesche Picotte’s life is engaging and accurate enough, and as the first attempt to encompass her life this book will be of interest to scholars of Great Plains studies and of American Indian studies alike.

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