



The Backwash of War: An Extraordinary American Nurse in World War I by Ellen N. La Motte.

Ed. Cynthia Wachtell. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2019. Pp. x, 239. ISBN 978-1-4214-2671-6.

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The Backwash of War is a collection of fourteen short stories published in 1916 based primarily on Ellen La Motte's harrowing experiences as a nurse in the Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No. 1, a French field hospital famously established and directed by her fellow American Mary Borden. In one gruesome tale after another, La Motte describes not a place of healing but a chamber of horrors, a place of war-inflicted death, stinking of flesh-rotting gas gangrene and leaking wounds to the bowels, where men suffered traumas ranging from brain hemorrhages to syphilis, to name just a few. The patients in her stories expire in agony, ill-cared for by a largely indifferent and calloused medical staff. A visiting general sometimes hands out medals to the mangled soldiers.

The literary equivalent of an Otto Dix painting, La Motte's uncompromising assault upon the supposed glory and nobility of war was quickly banned in Britain; multiple printings appeared in the United States, but there too the book was inevitably suppressed in 1918. When La Motte protested to her publisher that her stories simply told the truth about war, he explained, "That is exactly the trouble" (11). Censored on both sides of the Atlantic, *The Backwash of War* slipped into literary oblivion. An ill-timed second edition (1934)—public interest in literary accounts of the Great War waned after 1930—sold poorly, and the book remained generally unknown to scholars until well into the early twentieth-first century.

The ferocious depiction of medical grotesqueries in the stories reveals the sharp disparity between ever more lethal modern military technology and the patently inadequate medical resources of the pre-antibiotic era. The narrative is intensified by La Motte's clipped and sardonic writing style. Consider the following passage from "Heroes," a nightmarish account of a desperate *poilu* who botches his suicide attempt and then receives medical treatment with a hideous purpose in mind:

He was a deserter, and discipline must be maintained. Since he had failed in the job, his life must be saved, he must be nursed back to health, until he was well enough to be stood up against a wall and shot. This is War. Things like this also happen in peace time, but not so obviously. (98)

Or this piece of Hemingwayesque prose from "Women and Wives," where La Motte puckishly notes the flourishing of prostitution amid a conflict supposedly waged in the defense of home and family: "You know, they won't let wives come to the front. Woman can come into the War Zone, on various pretexts, but wives cannot. Wives, it appears, are bad for the morale of the Army" (133). Here, as elsewhere, the language of *The Backwash of War* anticipates the spare but nuanced prose of Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925) or *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). La Motte, too, was a literary modernist who wrote of an unprecedented world war in an experimental way.

In this new edition of La Motte's neglected short story collection, American Studies professor Cynthia Wachtell (Yeshiva Univ.) equips the original text with a detailed introduction, a forty-one-page biography (with photographs) of the author, three wartime articles by La Motte (two

from *The Atlantic Monthly*), a bibliography of “Significant Publications by Ellen N. La Motte,” and helpful but unobtrusive textual notes.

Born into “a poor branch of the socially renowned du Pont family” (41) in 1873, La Motte received her medical education at the Johns Hopkins Hospital Training School for Nurses. She went on to become a national authority on tuberculosis care, the subject of her first book, as well as an ardent suffragist. In 1915, after a brief, unsatisfying stint as a war nurse in Paris, she volunteered to serve in the much grittier environment of Borden’s hospital near the Western Front. Working off and on for about a year, she gathered the raw impressions of military carnage that appear, reassembled as modernist art, in *The Backwash of War*. Subsequent travels in Asia exposed La Motte to the evils of the opium trade, which she railed against during the rest of a writing career that ended in 1934 with the unsuccessful revival of her antiwar masterpiece.

La Motte was forthrightly indifferent to social pressures and taboos in her personal life. She enjoyed a forty-five-year relationship with her partner, Emily Crane Chadbourne, “an American heiress and art collector” (60); during the Great War, the two women became close friends with none other than Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. Wachtell posits that Stein may have inspired La Motte’s shift from the comparatively conventional writing displayed in *The Tuberculosis Nurse*¹ to the more idiosyncratic, avant-garde stylings of *The Backwash of War*.

In a generous selection of photos, La Motte appears as a forceful, keenly intelligent, and attractively eccentric woman. One image, from the 1930s, shows her playing with her celebrated pet, a rare cockatoo from New Guinea. La Motte’s long life encompassed a meteoric rise in the field of nursing, a bold defiance of social and sexual norms, fleeting literary fame, notoriety as a public health reformer and anti-imperialist, and, ultimately, an incongruously impressive performance as an amateur stock trader. She died in 1961 at age eighty-seven after devoting her final decades to the management of Chadbourne’s inherited fortune, which she enhanced to the tune of \$1 million through shrewd stock market speculation.

While Wachtell’s well-researched biography (the most substantial that La Motte has received to date) paints a captivating portrait of an “extraordinary American woman,” the three wartime articles included here are an invaluable supplement to the book. “An American Nurse in Paris” describes La Motte’s disappointments in the American Ambulance of Paris, a French military hospital underwritten by US philanthropists. “Under Fire at Dunkirk” and “A Joy Ride” describe moments of peril when the writer’s adventures placed her within range of German artillery. Though these slickly written magazine pieces are far less daring than La Motte’s short stories, they showcase her keen eye for detail and a self-deprecating sense of humor. Most importantly, they expand her vision of the First World War beyond the claustrophobic confines of the Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No. 1, the hellish setting of twelve of the fourteen stories in *The Backwash of War*.

Interestingly, La Motte was not the only member of Mary Borden’s nursing staff to write of her experiences. Memoirs by Agnes Warner and Maud Mortimer² appeared in 1917. And Borden herself offered a vivid portrait of hospital life (and death) in her short story collection *The Forbidden Zone*.³ La Motte’s book is darker and more truthful than these works. As Mortimer put it, “She

1. Subtitle: *Her Function and Her Qualifications: A Handbook for Practical Workers in the Tuberculosis Campaign* (NY: Putnam, 1915.)

2. Respectively, *My Beloved Poilus* (St. John, NB: Barnes, 1917) and *Green Tent in Flanders Garden City* (NY: Doubleday, 1917).

3. New York: Doubleday, 1930.

is not here now to probe physical weakness but *to cut deeper*—for the purification of art and sentiment—down to the unquestionable depravity of the human heart” (37; my emphasis).

Cynthia Wachtell has resurrected La Motte’s deep cut into that depravity in an edition notable for painstaking scholarship, thoroughness, and attention to the needs of twenty-first-century readers. Every library devoted to the personal literature of World War I or the history of medicine and armed conflict should acquire this outstanding volume.