

[Black on La Motte, 'The Backwash of War: An Extraordinary American Nurse in World War I'](#)

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Ellen N. La Motte. *The Backwash of War: An Extraordinary American Nurse in World War I.* Edited by Cynthia Wachtell. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. 264 pp. \$24.95 (paper), [ISBN](#)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

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On the Belgian front lines, Ellen La Motte (1873-1961) came face to face with the senseless, bloody, gruesome destruction of modern warfare. La Motte was an American nurse who trained at Johns Hopkins and volunteered to serve in a French field hospital from 1915 to 1916 before the United States entered the war. She wrote *The Backwash of War*, a collection of fourteen sketches from a World War I field hospital, to illuminate the “ugliness [that] is churned up in the wake of mighty moving forces” of war, whose “slow onward progress stirs up the slime in the shallows” (p. 93). Cynthia Wachtell’s new edition of *The Backwash of War* includes an incredibly detailed contextual introduction, the first biography of La Motte, and three additional war essays that she wrote between 1915 and 1916. La Motte was a remarkable woman who was a nurse, writer, lesbian, anarchist, suffragist, and public health advocate. It is immediately apparent that this is not a typical depiction of war in the trenches.

Published in 1916, over a decade before Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), *The Backwash of War* is one of the earliest antiwar books from the First World War. Wachtell describes it as “an unflinching look at the destruction done by war to the human body and spirit” (p. 3). La Motte’s graphic imagery, irreverent tone, and dark humor capture both the grotesque and the pitiful aspects of soldiers mangled by the technologies of modern warfare.

The Backwash of War opens with the story “Heroes,” in which a desperate soldier on the front lines tries (unsuccessfully) to shoot himself through the roof of the mouth. La Motte explained: “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” (p. 98). Far from the romanticized image of a war fought by stoic heroes, La Motte’s patients are filthy and foul-mouthed, screaming, cursing, struggling against treatment, and spitting blood across the hospital ward. “Heroes” has ample criticism to go around: scorn for the man for being a “bad patient”; for the hospital for wasting so much ether, so many bandages, and so much time treating a deserter who was condemned to die; and finally, for the war itself for creating these conditions of misery and despair.

The other stories in the collection confront the human costs of war, highlighting the miserable experiences of wounded men rendered “ludicrous” and “repulsive” by German shells simply waiting

in the “awful interval between life and death” (p. 128). However, La Motte also illuminated how the war exposed the pettiness and selfishness of human behavior, the “dirty sediment at the bottom of most souls” (p. 135)— from the indifference of the orderlies who sat drinking wine and ignoring their dying patient to the general who perfunctorily pinned the Croix de Guerre on dying soldiers. In each case, pointed critiques of warfare in general—for example, the unequal burden it places on the working class—undergird the more quotidian accounts of individual suffering in the field hospital.

Unsurprisingly, the book was immediately censored in Britain and France after its publication in 1916 from concerns that it would damage morale. While American critics initially praised it for revealing the harsh truth of modern warfare, it was later censored after the US entered the war. La Motte recounted the history of the book’s censorship in a new introduction to the book, which was reprinted in 1934, to serve as a reminder of the dangers of being complacent in peacetime.

In Wachtell’s introduction to her new edition of the book, she provides a fascinating history of its reception both during and after the war. While there is some repetition between Wachtell’s introduction and her biography of La Motte, this allows each to stand alone and the rich contextual detail makes them well suited for both literature and history seminars. *The Backwash of War* provides a unique perspective on the First World War that highlights both the devastation of modern warfare and the odious aspects of human nature that it brings to the surface.

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