Heroes”, the opening section of Ellen Newbold La Motte’s memoir The Backwash of War (1916), begins:

When he could stand it no longer, he fired a revolver up through the roof of his mouth, but he made a mess of it. The ball tore out his left eye, and then lodged somewhere under his skull, so they bundled him into an ambulance and carried him, cursing and screaming, to the nearest field hospital. The journey was made in double-quick time, over rough Belgian roads. To save his life, he must reach the hospital without delay, and if he was bounced to death jolting along at breakneck speed, it did not matter. That was understood. 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.

You could be forgiven for not having read the book, or even having heard of La Motte (1873–1961), an American nurse and writer. Startlingly graphic, The Backwash of War: The human wreckage of the battlefield as witnessed by an American hospital nurse, written from her experience in a French hospital in Belgium during 1915 and 1916, was immediately suppressed in Britain on first publication in September 1916, and in America in the summer of 1918. It was not republished until 1934, and this history of suppression accounts, at least in part, for its having been largely absent from literary and cultural memory. A contemporary review suggested that the sketches “are somehow too terribly intimate for inspection. It is as though we have stumbled unwittingly upon scenes we have no right to witness”. Subversive in topic and style, the book deserves a place in the canon of major works from the First World War.

In March 1916, the Chesney Medical Archives at Johns Hopkins University acquired sixteen letters from La Motte to her American friend Amy Wesselhoeft von Erdberg in Germany, donated by Wesselhoeft’s descendants after they were found in a hayloft behind the family home in Waldheim, near Berlin, in 2013. (This unorthodox storage method helped to preserve the letters, which are for the most part remarkably undamaged.) The letters were written from Baltimore, Paris, London, and Chicago between December 1911 and August 1916, a period about which little is known in La Motte’s career. They provide a unique insight into her personal and political life before The Backwash of War, revealing the range of lesbian, suffragette and avant-garde circles she moved in before and during the war; revealing, too, the extent of her radicalism.

Exactly how and when La Motte met Wesselhoeft is unclear, although a reference to “Ten good years” in a letter of 1914 suggests that it was in 1904. Born in 1873 in Louisville, Kentucky, La Motte spent her adolescence in Delaware, living with her cousin, the wealthy industrialist Alfred I. DuPont. From 1898-

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1902 she attended Johns Hopkins Training School for Nurses, where she met Gertrude Stein (who left the School of Medicine in 1901 without a degree). La Motte’s student evaluation, completed for a retrospective survey in 1951, summarizes her unfavourable impressions of Hopkins:

EVALUATIVE SUMMARY OF IMPRESSIONS AND EXPERIENCES AS A STUDENT NURSE
Nothing to evaluate. Did not like it.
EVALUATIVE SUMMARY OF IMPRESSIONS AND EXPERIENCES AS A GRADUATE NURSE
Ditto

La Motte returned to Baltimore in 1905 to work as a tuberculosis nurse, and was appointed the Superintendent of the Tuberculosis Division of the Baltimore Health Department from 1910 until 1913. Wesselhoeft, born in 1876 in Massachusetts, was the daughter of a well-known physician whose patients included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Initially a keen violinist, Wesselhoeft married Robert von Erdberg, a Latvian, in 1905 and moved to Germany, where Erdberg became known as an advocate for working class and adult education and the expansion of the public library system. In her letters, La Motte wrote to Wesselhoeft of everyday matters, travels, clothing, finances, social customs, family issues, and feminism and political activism. It is clear that the two women had a close and loving relationship – La Motte always began and ended her letters with an expression of affection, calling Amy “dear, dear friend of my life”.

Although we know that La Motte spent her later life with a female partner (Emily Crane Chadbourne, an art collector from Chicago), the first two letters, from Baltimore in December 1911, recounting her anguish over a woman called Louise from a wealthy New York family, show that she had earlier lesbian relationships: “I told her I was ready to go with her – anywhere – to give up my work and all here, and together we could find work and freedom beyond the reach of any one. She did not want to. . . I believe it was her feeling for her people – for all that it would mean to them, little as she is actually fond of them. Traditions of caste are strong. So we have agreed to go our ways apart”.

La Motte had previously talked to Wesselhoeft in person about the year-long relationship: “You saved me last summer”, she told her in March 1912. Her description of the relationship, not a permissible one in early twentieth-century American society, poignantly depicts the familial and societal pressures on women, particularly of a certain class: “She admitted that I was the best friend she had ever had in her life, and that she loved me better than any one, but she could not give up social position and family pride – that it would mean so much to her family, that her sisters could not marry men of ‘position’ if these men knew of her”. Despite her heartache, La Motte told Wesselhoeft she felt “square with the world and with my beliefs and with my soul”, affirming a sense of personal principle she would retain throughout her life: the “stern New England conscience” she mentions in a letter in 1928. And she maintained a sense of humour throughout: “I was mistaken in her—at least, in my ability to help her. Now catch me trying to develop souls in the daughters of the idle rich. Good Lord”.

The letters simultaneously shed light on the extent of La Motte’s social and political activism in Baltimore. She joked in December 1911 of her changing political beliefs: “Outwardly I’m a good Socialist. . . but inwardly I’m a free Anarchist – free – free. Tell Polly [Wesselhoeft’s older sister] it is a lot more fun”. In Baltimore La Motte agitated for feminist causes, writing in March 1912 of her frustration with the state of suffrage in Maryland:

We have been having a very very busy winter of it. . . Two suffrage bills introduced into the legislation, one of which was defeated promptly and the other is still in committee. The second bill is for municipal suffrage only—suffrage with the fangs drawn, since it admits taxing women only. That however, was but an entering wedge.

In descriptions which prefigure the caricatures of generals in The Backwash of War, she depicted their opponents in sarcastic terms (“the chivalrous Southern gentlemen, who maintain that woman’s place is in the home”) and noted the long hours of extra work her political activism entailed. Alongside her political work, La Motte was reading the latest feminist literature, sending Wesselhoeft a book by Charlotte Gilman for Christmas 1911 and asking in March 1912, “Are you getting [Gilman’s magazine] The Forerunner? . . . Mrs. Gilman is so virtually as well worth white”.

Despite her activism, it was still a surprise when, in late June 1913, La Motte gave up her position and successful nursing career in Baltimore and left the US to join the militant suffragette campaign and the Women’s Social and
Political Union in London. When asked by a newspaper reporter to confirm the suffragette rumor and find her, she answered: “I should certainly like to stand, if only for a moment, among those big, free people. I would like to strike a blow in their revolution”. La Motte told the reporter that her cousin (probably Du Pont), who “heartily disapproves of suffragettes”, was “instructing her in the art of escape” and planning her plans to go to England, sent her a cheque with the words “For Jail”. La Motte’s friends didn’t take her suffragette ambitions too seriously, either: a further article reported that on her departure her room was “draped with the usual flowers and garlands, rose buds in black, visits sur- rounded by a most formidable array of bombs, torpedoes, huge cannon crackers and innumerable boxes of matches”: 

Upon close investigation the bombs were found to contain little paper dunces caps, the torpedoes when opened disclosed fans, on which was written “To cool your brow in the heat of the fray,” and the cannon crackers, when the fuses were pulled, contained delicious candies. In addition to these unique offerings, there were the usual flowers and garlands of suffragette books, one of which was entitled “Awful Temptation,” and when opened was found to be a box of bonbons, with the words “For the hung- er strike” written across the top of the box.

During the summer of 1913 in London, La Motte recounted her experiences in a series of articles for the Baltimore Sun, with titles such as “Caught in Suffragette Riot, Ellen N. La Motte, of Baltimore, Is Knocked Down And Then—Well, She Writes About It,” and “Ellen La Motte Insulted on Crowded London Street, That Is, A Man Tried to Insult Her. But It Went Right Over Her. As She Kept On Selling Suffragette Papers To The Surging Throng’s”. Although written humorously, the articles are a serious attempt to elicit sympathy for the suffrage cause, describing in detail the abuse and violence suffered by the women involved. La Motte recounted testifying against the police about the violent aftermath of a WSPU meeting and selling copies of the Suffragette on Mary Richardson’s pitch while Richardson was in Holloway Prison. The letters reveal that it was Richardson, the notorious Canadian suffragette who claimed to have been at the Emmett Park the day that Emily Davison dived in front of the King’s horse, and is most widely remembered for her attack on the Rokey Venus with a meat cleaver in the National Gal- lery in March 1914, with whom La Motte spent the majority of her time in London. In October 1913 La Motte left London for Paris. As the letters demonstrate, this was at least in part to help Richardson on her release from prison, and Christabel Pankhurst, who was at the time in Paris with her early establishment of a suffragette exile in Paris. As La Motte scholar Lea M. Williams has noted, a formal letter in the Brit- ish Library from La Motte to Pankhurst in mid- October – forwarded to the WSPU Offices in London by Richardson – states that both La Motte and Richardson had tuberculosis. The let- ter implicitly suggests that the organization could use this information to highlight the vio- lent treatment of suffragettes by the author- ities: “the Holloway physician must have known that she had tuberculosis … if he knows and believes it well to forcibly feed her, that would seem to be a most highly dangerous thing to do”, La Motte wrote.

Alongside her interaction with the suffra- gettes in Paris, La Motte was simultaneously becoming part of the avant-garde circle of Ger- trude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, as a letter to Wesselhoeft of October 31 referring to their salon soirées demonstrates: “The last was her birthday – dinner at a hotel, and the Theatre de Champs Elysées, to hear the Madrid Symphony Orchestra. Dr. Clari- bel Cone gave the party, which included seven – and among them were M. and Mme. Matisse. I have met a lot of interesting people through the Stein’s – Gertrude Stein herself, sur- rounded by a most formidable array of bombs, torpedoes, huge cannon crackers and innumerable boxes of matches”: 

Eellen Newbold La Motte, c.1902

She told Wesselhoeft that she was moving to an apartment on the Île Saint-Louis, because “Every thing is very expensive here; rents, food, every thing is so thoroughly Americanized”. Unfortunately she stayed at her new address less than two weeks because, as she put it, the chimney smoked and the landlady disapproved of horse meat. It was back to her Latin Quarter apartment close to the Steins and “the good circle of friends” who were distracting her from her work.

The letters again reveal the extent of La Motte’s commitment to the suffragette cause. On Christmas Day 1913, an apologetic letter to Wesselhoeft reveals that La Motte hadn’t gone to Berlin for Christmas as promised, but had instead gone to London to see Richardson and to participate in a Christmas Eve suffragette parade, “carrying a sandwich board & a lantern” through central London. Despite staying in a “3rd rate lodging house” where she spent “the most curious Christmas, utterly joyful”, she told Wesselhoeft that London in winter was “wonderful” and the parade “was fine – nothing disagreeable, except one man who called me ‘Mouldy Maggie’ and my sense of honour triumphant over that!” La Motte was more forthright to Stein in Paris, sending her a postcard which mocked the Anti-Suffrage League, wishing her a Merry Christmas and telling her that she hoped to see her on her return. Although Richardson would later claim that her attack on the Rokey Venus three months later was provoked by the violent arrest of Emmeline Pankhurst the previous day, it is fascinating to speculate on whether Rich- ardson and La Motte discussed these next suffra- gette actions during that Christmas together, and whether La Motte may have known of, or helped plan, this attack before it happened. La Motte’s commentary on these suffragette actions in her letters makes it clear, for the first time, that her cousin was John Singer Sargent, whose work was another target of suffragette activism. In May 1914, two months after Rich- ardson had slashed the Rokey Venus, La Motte wrote: “My revered and famous cousin had his picture hacked at the Academy a day or two ago – Polly and I will rejoice at that”. The picture slashed at the Royal Academy on May 4, just two days before the Sargent’s portrait of Henry James. Sargent was La Motte’s cousin through his mother Mary Newbold, which makes La Motte a distant relation of the elegant Edwardian society that was the direct opponent of Stein’s avant-garde. Perhaps this explains her plans to have her cousin Sargent’s commission to paint, first the wealthy Baltimore suffragist Mary Elizabeth Garrett, in 1904, and “The Four Doctors”, the four leading physicians of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, in 1906 (one of the four, Howard Kelly, visited Paris in 1914. Their visit to Marie Curie found her “out”). The slashing of Sargent’s painting prompted La Motte to write that she was “so anxious to get in with the Suffragettes again”, and she wrote the following month from London enclosing a newspaper clipping about parliamentary dis- cussion of the militants: “But do you notice, not any thing of righting the injustice they are struggling to right – simply a discussion of further inducements – it is unspeakable? Can you conceive of a nation more blind, more wickedly blind, more stupid and barbarous?” Despite her anger at the treat- ment of the suffragettes, La Motte appears to have changed her mind, telling Wesselhoeft: “All the same, I do not feel that this fight was a fight. Much as I admire these magnificent women, and much as I feel the intense right- eousness of their fight . . . I am glad I am going back to Paris, and to my people”. 

La Motte’s thoughts eventually turned to real rather than symbolic war in 1914 when, after spending the summer with her “people” in America, she returned to Paris at the end of October to join the war effort, initially working as a volunteer in the American Hospital in Neully. A letter to Stein in November 1914 notes that she was sorry she couldn’t come to see her – “things have got rather busy here” – and that she had “a lot of things to ask you, that I want your opinion on”. Despite being very eager to volunteer – she told Wesselhoeft in March 1915 that she had made numerous attempts to get “real work” – it was La Motte’s American status that prevented her finding any: “as a neutral I am not eligible for any thing!” The war had certainly thrown La Motte’s principles into disarray, as she told Wesselhoeft: “the things I did believe in are all bust up, blown over, torn down, and all that is left is on a firm foundation are the things that all my life I have had little use for! War has reduced me to a bad plight!” But the war also seems to have prompted her to write some- thing “that is perhaps me” – as opposed, that is, as The Tuberculosis Nurse, Her Function and Her Qualifications: A handbook for practical workers in the tubercu- losis campaign, published in 1915. For the first time, we see the correspondence end. But through the letters, we see part of the partisan reporting in France and Germany in heated terms. La Motte wrote in April 1915: “Did you ever stop to consider what it means to be allowed to hear only one side of a question, and to have no access to any other? Put that in your pipe and smoke it”. Over a year after this argument, in August 1916, La Motte was still reassuring Wesselhoeft that “you and I have as much in common and more than we ever had before! This war has taught me a lot of things”. As the war progressed, La Motte was increas-
The New York Review of Books often felt like an extreme form of home schooling. Robert Silvers educated himself like a Renaissance prince through his own magazine, each of his writers another courtier, another tutor. He hardly read anything else. When I first met him – I was twenty-one, fresh from university, assigned to the night shift, which with Silvers could last well into the morning – the only time I saw him reading a book was Stefan Zweig’s Chess Story, which he treated like a delicacy, and took his time getting through. My job involved mostly five hours. He quickly combed my essay on Wallace Stevens. “I’ve always been sceptical of people who claim to understand Stevens.” It was not the kind of thing you heard from professors. I was mysteriously hired. As the longest-serving member of the NYRB ladder, my duties included ordering his shirts, delivering galleys by hand to the more ancient contributors, and rendering verdicts on his rushed shaving routine before his regimented evening absences at book parties and operas, only to return to the office, hours later. “Any news?” At all hours, I was ready to lounge towards the computer to take dictation that would begin unprompted, with a “Dear Danny” or a “Dear Mark,” bellowed or wheezed from behind his wall of advance reading copies. Bob had nothing but reassurances for them, tech leads, for their light comments and encouragement in the margins of proofs of pieces – A galaxy, B galaxy, C galaxy – were pored over by his writers like report cards or doctors’ prescriptions. Meanwhile, his moods were the weather of his underlings’ lives: moments of exhilaration ("Marvellous piece! She’s done it! This will cause a stir!") followed by moments of incandescent outrage. When it came up that I did not know who André Malraux was, it was a scandal. Bob paused his eyes, stood up from his desk and relieved me of my scalp. “Friend of Camus, author of Man’s Fate, minister for de Gaulle – he cleaned up Paris! You will never know what Paris before Malraux was like!”

In the middle of the summer of 2003, when one of us sheepishly informed him that there was a city-wide black-out – the cabs outside were already jostling to get Grand Prix with no traffic lights to restrain them – he looked up from his pages, and said, “Well, we’ll go on working outside in the park.” When we tried to get him to go to work in Central Park, he couldn’t be budged: there was still enough light coming out the windows. By the time we were informed we needed to leave the building, we had to descend the building steps in darkness – down dozens of staircases. Bob took to the evacuation with relish: a galaxy in one hand, flashlight in another; he sprinted down each flight, and then very deliberately and deliberately flashed the light for where his co-editor Barbara Epstein, slowly coming down the stairs, could see. There was so much of him in these movements: the dash, the studied accuracy, the total immersion of the writer. For Robert Silvers, the very concept of “cosiness” in the letters of Isaiah Berlin.

But Bob understood the needs and feelings of writers in a way that made other editors often seem obtuse by comparison. He warmed to small things. In the print world, when something made it seem nothing could be more important than the piece at hand, and was fastidious in avoiding unnecessary fiddling. I cannot remember anyone saying that a piece had not been improved in his hands. He was brilliant at small things. His traversing of an inspired pairings between book and author – the ideal salon evenings in his mind – into a reality on the page. He had good writers supply him with more good writers whom he knew how to keep and coddle, and who, in turn, gave him better pieces, for the most part, than they gave elsewhere. And as Bob knew better than most, and as the parade of praise by him of his writers suggests, nothing serves an editor better than his own legend, especially when he knows how to use it. to record the “ugliness” of war, she turns her satirical eye on all aspects of conflict, from the news organisations to the French soldiers, to the men and women who still come to the cities and towns of France, and that she reminded them that it was “a surgical ‘triumph’ but begs his father to kill him. There are, La Motte tells us, “many people to write you of the noble side, the heroic side, the exalted side of war”, but she writes of “what I saw”, and says that even those who later wrote that the book “caused, I believe, a great deal of unpleasant feeling”. The letters at Johns Hopkins, revealing the affectionate, loving side of Ellen La Motte and her political and aesthetic commitments in the pre-war and war years, allow us to read it with fresh eyes – and we cannot help thinking of the abstraction of Stein or Matièse, or the militant feminism of Richardson, when we do so.

Extracts from the letters of Ellen N. La Motte appear by kind permission of the Cheshire Medical Archives, Johns Hopkins University Library.