



Margaret R. Higonnet. *Nurses at the Front: Writing the Wounds of the Great War*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001. x + 161 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55553-484-4; \$40.00 (library), ISBN 978-1-55553-485-1.

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Expanding the Literary Canon: Nurses' Memoirs of World War I

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In recent years a number of authors have drawn attention to women's experiences of the First World War. Various anthologies and critical texts have also challenged traditional definition of "war literature" by defining and defending the place of women writers in the Great Wars literary canon.[1] With the publication of *Nurses at the Front: Writing the Wounds of the Great War*, editor Margaret Higonnet (Professor of English at the University of Connecticut and an Affiliate at Harvard University's Center for European Studies) makes an important contribution to this effort. In this affordable volume (suitable for undergraduate classes), Higonnet brings to contemporary readers excerpts of works by two American women authors whose insightful and evocative writings about their experience on the Western front have not been readily available since the interwar period. A useful glossary of French terms is included.

When the war began, Ellen N. La Motte (1873-1961), a graduate of Johns Hopkins Training School, was a professional nurse working in Baltimore. In 1914 she volunteered her services to the American hospital in Paris. La Motte first published *The Backwash of War: the Human Wreckage of the Battlefield as Witnessed by an American Hospital Nurse* in 1916. A series of fourteen vignettes, the book recounted her nursing work in the horrifying conditions immediately behind the trenches in Belgium. In her introduction La Motte explains the book's title: "Much ugliness is churned up in the wake of mighty, moving forces.... this is the Backwash of War" (p. 3). Her raw images and painful depiction of the "wounds of war" led the publishers to withdraw the book during the propaganda efforts that accompanied American entry into the war. The book was republished in 1934, when isolationists praised its blunt and honest portrayal of battlefield suffering.[2]

Mary Borden (1886-1968), the daughter of a wealthy

Chicago businessman and a Vassar graduate, had married an Englishman and was living in London prior to WWI. In 1914 she volunteered with the French Red Cross. Like La Motte she immediately found herself frustrated with the inefficient administering of medical care to soldiers. Borden put her financial resources to the task of creating a one hundred-bed, frontline surgical unit—Hpital Chirurgicale Mobile No.1—which came under French military command, first at Ypres and later the Somme. La Motte was one of many British and American nurses who staffed the unit. Borden began to write about her experiences with military medicine and the horror of modern warfare during the war. She published her memories, stories and poems—in her words, a "collection of fragments" (p. 79)—in 1929. The title, *The Forbidden Zone*, is a translation of the term the French used for the area immediately behind the front.

In *Writing the Wounds of War*, chapters from both memoirs are brought together in a fashion that emphasizes the common experiences of Borden and La Motte. Higonnet's introduction contains biographical information and a history of the texts, as well as a literary attempt to link the authors' work in terms of content and form. Although the strongest evidence of any relationship between the two women is found in a brief reference by Gertrude Stein in her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Higonnet asserts that various depictions of two anonymous nurses in the texts "correspond to La Motte and Borden themselves" (p. xvi). She further claims "the paired nurses in the sketches by La Motte and Borden suggest that these two women were writing in a dialogue with each other" (p. xxix). Critics have suggested that this attempt to relate the two texts is forced and detracts from each author's unique individual voice. Areila Freedman notes Higonnet "downplays the length and breadth of Borden's literary career and her considerable differences from La Motte by presenting the two women generically, as her title indicates, as 'nurses at the front.' By

leaving out many of the opening vignettes of Borden's book and all of the poetry with which the book concludes, Higonet edits the wartime sketches to further emphasize their similarities. However, when these books are read in full they create quite a different impression." [3]

Vivid in detail and powerful in emotion, both memoirs do leave haunting impressions. Both women had intimate experience with the agonizing effect of war on the human body and spirit. Both had profound ethical and moral concerns about their work. Both felt the irony of patching badly damaged men up so that they could be returned to the front where they would most likely be killed. Both confront the reader with a shocking reality that is, at times, cloaked in an almost surreal prose. Significantly, both La Motte and Borden traveled in avant-garde literary circles and wrote works of fiction (Borden's novel about a nurse on the Western front, *Sarah Gay*, was published in 1934). Higonet touches on the thorny issues of separating their use of literary device and stylistic forms from the historic reality they attempted to evoke and document in their memoirs. Importantly she reminds readers that, like all memoirs, these works fall somewhere between fact and fiction.

Notes

[1]. For example, see Yvonne Klein, ed., *Beyond the Home Front: Women's Autobiographical Writing of the Two World Wars* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Agnes Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman, and Judith Hattaway, eds., *Women's Writing on the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Margaret

Higonnet, ed., *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I* (New York: Penguin, 1999); Joyce Marlow, ed., *The Virago Book of Women and the Great War* (London: Virago, 1999); Claire Tylee, Elaine Turner and Agnes Cardinal, eds., *War Plays by Women* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999); and Angela K. Smith, ed., *Women's Writing of the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). See also Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Munich and Susan Squier, eds., *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1989); Claire Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings, 1914-64* (New York: Macmillan, 1990); Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Dorothy Goldman, ed., *Women and World War I: The Written Response* (London: Macmillan, 1993); Sharon Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate, eds., *Women's Fiction and the Great War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

[2]. La Mottes introduction to the republished edition can be found at: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5326>

[3]. Ariela Freedman, "Mary Borden's Forbidden Zone: Women's Writing from No-Man's-Land," *Modernism/Modernity* 9.1 (2002): 109-124.

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