

George Sand: man beyond her times

PARIS. Victor Hugo revered her, Chopin loved her, France's "good society" despised her. She was a dozen wild, controversial women under one man's name: George Sand. Born two hundred years ago as Amantine-Aurore Lucile Dupin, she blazed her way through French intellectual and cultural life for 72 years, and passionate fans and foes dispute her standing to this day - highbrow daily *Le Monde* last fall handing them almost a whole weekend magazine.

Sand drew her own caricature. Man's clothes, cigars, relentless social climbing and networking. Her personal life was her public life, and she delighted in shocking her upper-bourgeoisie relatives by flaunting a scandalous lifestyle. She paraded lovers of at least two sexes. She defied, then left, her husband in a no-divorce France to live alone in Paris. Even when she went off to Venice with a young poet-lover, Alfred de Musset, she betrayed him with an Italian doctor, leaving the poor lad limp with perplexity.

She wrote ceaselessly – some 80 novels, each usually in a few weeks, 20 plays, and uncounted short stories and articles. She also wrote at least 19,000 letters to people great and small. In both fiction and letters, she never planned themes or structure; she just took her pen and let creative passion ("logorrhoea," sniped enemies) sweep her along. Most now call her torrential novels mediocre – all gush, no shape – but a new generation of readers, perhaps dismayed at the aridity of today's French novel, are finding them engaging again.

The George Sand pen-name came about for the same reason that her contemporary, England's Mary Ann Evans, wrote as George Elliot: women writers, in the 19th century, were not taken seriously. (Even Elliot wrote a piece called "Silly novels by lady novelists" – an echo of W.S. Gilbert's *Mikado* slap at "that singular anomaly, the lady novelist").

Sand laughed last. Her novels sold widely. Happily, her grandmother left her a splendid little castle. Throughout her stormy life, this was her haven, her security and her freedom – confirming again the dictum that there are very few situations in life where the possession of large sums of money cannot be of some assistance.

In ideas and enthusiasms, Sand lived without restraint. Although her early novels tapped into the romantic vogue, her lust for justice and equality later drove her to back socialist, even revolutionary, ideas. On both counts, she was a soul-sister to Hugo. Both were hell-raisers, both fearless, eloquent, and determined to live as they wanted.

She didn't harp on feminist theory. She preferred to apply it. And that's why you find her on all the better gender-studies programs everywhere. She didn't peddle Freud-like hypotheses about cigars; she smoked the cigars. Stomping with stogie into editors' offices, she demanded to be treated like a man. "I ask the support of no one," she said, "neither to kill someone for me, gather a bouquet, correct a proof, nor to go with me to the theatre."

Her network of friends, especially celebrated friends, probably gave somebody the idea for the Rolodex. A dinner-party at Rohan might include any of Chopin, de Musset, Flaubert, Lizst, Balzac, Turgenev, Heine, Delacroix, plus a princeling or two. History doesn't dwell much on her lady friends, though Sand called actress Marie Dorval her one true love. The queen-bee syndrome may have been at work: she junked years of letters from a good friend, the Countess d'Agoult, telling her they were worthless.

She was a piece of work, but a masterpiece of work to many. She would not shut up, whether as writer or conversationalist. Driven, industrious, obsessed with expressing herself, she used others as her fuel and foil. Was she, as a child early abandoned, achingly insecure? She was, strangely, modest about her heritage. "They will forget me in fifty years," she said.

Well, they haven't. And all points to her seizing minds a lot longer. She was just too original, too gutsy, just too don't-give-a-damn independent at a time when women crocheted, nodded at husband's whims, and bowed covered heads to the priest. Even if her writing becomes passé, her example will always stir free-thinking women. And maybe make free-thinkers of a few men.

Today's sudden rage for Sand has unearthed an unsuspected side of the acerbic public figure. As she grew older, she lived more and more in her village, forsaking the prancing and preening of Paris. And what a dazzled public now finds, in witnesses' letters, is a profoundly kind and simple woman. Outside her circus of celebrity, the peasants she walked with to gather flowers or inspect the crops adored her. She tended to their children, their illnesses, and shared their joys, just as a good neighbour.

One female biographer calls Sand "a reasonable feminist," given the limited possibilities of her time. But it was her unreason, not her reasonableness, that made this woman a better man than most.