

Hart on Reid, trans. van Slyke (2018)

Martine Reid. *George Sand*. Translated with a foreword by Gretchen van Slyke. The Pennsylvania State UP, 2018, pp. xxi + 258, ISBN 978-0-271081-06-9

Kathleen Hart, Vassar College

Martine Reid's biography of George Sand fulfills the promise of its back cover: "This exciting, intelligent and informative biography does not dwell solely on Sand's romantic escapades (though it does do them justice) nor finds it necessary to insist that she was a great writer (which she was); the author takes that as a matter of course. Instead, Reid treats Sand as a worthy biographer should treat a great author, while pointing out the obstacles Sand faced as a woman writer in a repressive century." Prior to the publication in French of this instructive and engaging biography, Martine Reid had already written several groundbreaking books and articles about Sand and reviewed other noteworthy studies of the celebrated author whose legal name was Aurore Dudevant. Reid clearly states her reason for producing the new biography: "To put forth a series of observations that will allow the reader to size up an exceptional personality and fount of creativity and at the same to refute a few die-hard clichés" about a "great woman" (3).

Biographies of Sand abound; they seem to appear each time new perspectives emerge within the academy or the wider culture concerning gender roles, writing, and the relationship of authors' lives to their works. In turn, revisiting Sand's life and works, often in light of new discoveries and approaches, seems to contribute to developing those new perspectives. Sand forces us to reckon with the traps into which many biographers have fallen: literature does not result from the genius of a disembodied mind, but nor do anecdotal details, Freudian speculation about the subject's unconscious mind, or being of this or that gender and social class illuminate an author's output in and of themselves. Arguably, scholars' attempts to make sense of the very fascinating connections between Sand's life and works are what may have helped to transform attitudes about the previously disparaged genre of biography itself. The example of Sand makes resoundingly clear that there is no such thing as a definitive biography; we now take for granted that each new biographer adopts a point of view while reminding readers of the importance of both context and the content of the author's writing.

Earlier "fast-paced" biographies of Sand, including several that appeared during the centennial of her birth, tended to sensationalize Sand's love life, or to conflate her person with the female characters of her novels. Later biographers, such as Belinda Jack, and scholars such as Isabelle Naginski, have pored over the particularly feminist and literary issues raised by Sand's life and works that lend themselves to detailed analysis. Reid appropriately acknowledges these latter trailblazers in the bibliography (which includes a list of documentaries about Sand, and of cinematic or television adaptations of Sand's fictional works) but this biography nonetheless fills a gap in that it will appeal to an intellectually curious general public as well as to specialists. It keeps things moving and accounts for clichés without producing new ones. Not all biographers have been as well-versed in Sand's writings as Reid nor as capable of identifying their connections both to Sand's life and to literary and philosophical writings that pre-date or come after Sand. Reid draws upon her own scholarship (which uncovered a new potential origin for the choice of the initial "G" that later became the "George" of Sand's pseudonym), knowledge provided by other biographers or scholars and, of course, Sand's autobiography and correspondence. And Reid tells a good story. The biography is lively and insightful, establishing Sand's significance (in particular her rightful place beside Victor Hugo), and skillfully balancing quotes from Sand's writings with the narrative of her other actions without losing any of its momentum to excessively complicated literary analyses or historical explanations.

Gretchen van Slyke's translation is excellent and succeeds in creating the illusion that it is not one. Appropriately, van Slyke's translation includes a foreword that briefly introduces Sand to an Anglophone audience while calling attention to what makes Reid's biography stand apart. While giving a "central place to literature" and to the significance of Sand's pen name, Slyke observes, Reid's biography gives attention to the full range of Sand's multi-faceted interests, activities, and preoccupations—"not just her husband, lovers, and children or the books and plays that she wrote, but also the various expressions of her political commitment, in addition to her wide-ranging artistic and scientific interests and the ways she organized her days and nights in a busy household." Thus does Reid offer us "the most complete portrait possible of George Sand" (ix). Hence Slyke's foreword prepares readers unfamiliar with Sand to encounter an extraordinary life story. And yet, as Reid emphasizes in the conclusion, the life story is ultimately inseparable from all of the author's writings—not just her fiction, but also her political and autobiographical writings and correspondence: "It is all this all mixed together that has to be explored in order to grasp *something* of the life of an extraordinary personality" (211).

Volume: 48.1–2

Year:

- 2019