Cordelia Scharpf

Luise Büchner

A Nineteenth-Century Evolutionary Feminist
Introduction

Luise Büchner (1821–1877) was a pioneer of the women’s movement in the German states in the middle of the nineteenth century. But her innovative contributions are not as well known as they should be because of her untimely death and the loss of much valuable historical material during World War II.

On 11 September 1944, at 11.35 p.m., fire started raining from the clear skies over Darmstadt, about thirty kilometers south of Frankfurt am Main, Germany. For nearly an hour, the British Royal Air Force tested a new strategy to inflict maximum damage and casualty: 230 bombers coming from various directions joined over Darmstadt, dropping bombs as they flew away in a formation of an opening fan. The Brandnacht (night of fire) resulted in the destruction of 78% of Darmstadt proper (K. Schmidt 68), death by burns or suffocation of over 12,300, and homelessness for 70,000 people (170). The former Grand-Ducal palace, including the famous Hofbibliothek (the Court Library), the old town, and the new residential areas were irreparably damaged.

Among the houses destroyed was that of the Büchner family on Hölgestraße 14 in the new residential area. Luise Büchner had lived there between 1874 and 1877 with her siblings Mathilde and Ludwig, and his family. Whatever literary records of the famous Büchner siblings – Georg, Luise, Ludwig, and Alexander – had survived up to that fateful night was lost forever. Forever lost also were the memories of Luise Büchner borne by her nephew, Georg Büchner, the only surviving member of the family who knew her intimately. He, his wife, and their daughter Victoria, who had written an article commemorating her great-aunt’s achievement in 1927, perished in the inferno (Büchner/Praetorius 44). When World War II ended, only two direct male descendants living in or near Darmstadt possessed rare memorabilia belonging to Luise Büchner: a small notebook into which she copied poems and aphorisms, and some photographs.
Luise Büchner was a well-known writer and activist in local and national women’s organizations of the 1860s and 1870s. She had not published a book-length autobiography when she passed away at the height of her “career.” Her biographers to date have relied on scarce reminiscences of her siblings, and obituaries and commemorative writings by members of the German women’s movement reprinted in Die Frau: Hinterlassene Aufsätze, Abhandlungen und Berichte zur Frauenfrage (Woman: Posthumous Essays, Treatises, and Reports on the “Woman Question”), as compiled by Ludwig Büchner in 1878. They consulted biographies by Alice Bousset and Ella Mensch, but paid less attention to those by Lina Morgenstern, Anna Plothow, Anna Günther, Victoria Büchner, and Johanna Waescher. All were written between the 1880s and 1931.

In 1953, Elli Müller-Rau chanced upon “the sister of Georg Büchner” and was at once impressed by her foresight and concern for women’s education and employability. Her effort to republish Büchner’s works in Darmstadt failed (Müller-Rau), but her two articles commemorated the hundredth anniversary of Büchner’s book, Die Frauen und ihr Beruf (Women and Their Vocation and Profession; hereafter: DFuiB), in 1955. Her enthusiasm for the “forgotten author” prompted her to contact Anton Büchner, a grandson of Büchner’s brother Wilhelm and a retired teacher. During the next two decades, he wrote monographs and articles on his ancestors. He republished Luise Büchner’s fragment, Ein Dichter (A Poet) with an epilogue, and found a rare copy of her narrative poem, Clara Dettin, which he reviewed in the 1970s.¹

Fourteen years after the monograph Ein Dichter appeared, Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres introduced Büchner for the first time to English-speaking readers. As more nineteenth-century women writers received scholarly attention in the 1980s and 1990s, Büchner was introduced as one of the sisters of famous men (Joeres). Maria Teresa Morreale introduced her to Italian and Susanne Kramer-Drużycka to Polish Germanists, and Klaus Kühnel wrote about Büchner in the former German Democratic Republic. Margarete Dierks missed no opportunity to revive interest in Büchner during the commemoration of Georg Büchner in Darmstadt. In 1999, Susan L. Piepke presented a
biographical introduction with her English translation of the book that made Büchner famous in 1856.

My interest in Büchner dates to 1997 when I also discovered her as “Georg Büchner’s sister,” as she has been identified in reference works since 1864 (Scharpf, Feminist 4–5). Guided by indices by Hein- sius, Kayser, and Goedeke, as well as the Gerritsen Collection of Women’s History, I began searching for her monographs in reunited Germany and the United States of America. The number of Büchner’s monographs available at libraries and from antiquarian book dealers is small. My search for her autographs was greatly facilitated by cooperative efforts of archives to allow access to their catalogs online. About forty letters by Büchner are available at German, Austrian, and French archives and libraries.

The primary sources on Büchner’s life and activities are scant. Her personal papers and papers concerning the women’s associations in Darmstadt were lost in the Brandnacht in 1944. The papers of the two national bourgeois women’s organizations, of which Büchner was a member in the 1860s and 1870s, are no longer available. Scholars retracing the founding of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Frauenverein (ADF; General German Women’s Association) of Leipzig cite primarily from Louise Otto-Peters’s report on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary (Das erste) and from its organ, Die Neuen Bahnen (New Paths). No other materials of the ADF between 1865 and 1896 can be found today at its successor organization, the Deutscher Staatsbürgerinnen-Verband (German Organization of Women Citizens) in Berlin.2 The papers of the Verband Deutscher Frauenbildungs- und Erwerbsvereine (VDFE; Organization of German Women’s Associations Promoting Women’s Education and Employability), deposited at the Lette-Verein (LV) in Berlin, were lost to incendiary bombs on 23 November 1943 (Oschernitzki 268).

It was difficult to ascertain the development of her thinking because of the lack of precision in dating her writings in Die Frau. For that reason, I examined all relevant and available periodical literature of her time in search of her articles and statements about her. This proved very productive: I found records about her activities and formation of her ideas dispersed among literary journals, journals on education and the women’s movement, and newspapers in Darmstadt, as
well as in Hesse and Prussia. To my surprise, she also published abroad in *Die neue Zeit* (*New Times*), a German-American journal promoting women’s rights. Taken together, the number of her articles increased by roughly 100% beyond those compiled in *Die Frau*.

These additional articles and the biographical portrait of her in the *Deutsch-Amerikanisches Conversations-Lexicon*, published in New York City in 1869, helped shed more light on the developments of Büchner’s ideas on the “woman question” and the extent of her practical work than was known previously. I can now offer a biography, which places her in the context of the political, social, and cultural life in Darmstadt as well as the socio-political developments from the mid-nineteenth-century German states to the Wilhelminian *Reich* in the 1870s.

My research supports Joeres’s impression that Büchner was a nineteenth-century, middle-class woman whose life was orderly, i.e., “unblemished, mostly carefree, clean, [and] upright” (“Dichter” 293). But additional material enables me to present a more detailed account of her life and work, and to give Büchner a voice of her own. And a voice of her own she had! I am grateful to Gerhard K. Friesen for publishing his transcription of and annotations to thirty-six letters exchanged between Büchner and Karl Gutzkow from 1859 to 1876. Büchner’s seventeen letters are rich with her critical and determined voice on literary and political matters. One can almost hear her talk about how to get their work published and reviewed, what she thought about some of their mutual acquaintances, and how to cope with health problems afflicting them in old age.

As more details about Büchner’s life were found, we can visualize her amongst literary friends gathering at her parents’ home where she agreed to write her famous book, and imagine her anxiety when the plaster of the ceiling at a museum fell down during a recital of Goethe’s poems and people scrambled for safety in the dark. We applaud when she called on women (and men) in Darmstadt in 1867 to join the newly founded women’s association to improve the women’s lot, i.e., to find and implement means to solve the “woman question.” Her numerous articles on the activities of the women’s associations, which appeared in the local newspapers and of which her earlier
biographers were unaware, allow me to to assess more fully the extent of her involvement in the women’s movement of the 1860s and 1870s.

As the economy and society in the German states were being transformed in the mid-nineteenth century (Blackbourn 135–170), liberal-minded men – such as Wilhelm Adolf Lette, Rudolf Virchow, and Franz von Holtzendorff, all of whom living in Prussia – discussed the changing role of women, and Lette founded professional schools for women. Progressive-minded women, led by Otto-Peters and Auguste Schmidt in Leipzig, promoted self-help and founded associations to improve the educational level and employability of women.

Discussions of the “woman question” of that time focused on improving the status of women within society, i.e., the relationship between the sexes, the prescribed duties of and rights for women in their families and society, their socio-economic and legal status, and political rights for women (Offen 27–30 and 83–84). In England and the United States of America where girls and young women had gained access to higher education and some professions, the next goal was to attain political rights for women (“Frauenfrage” 7: 37–38). In the German states, however, as Jenny Hirsch, secretary of the LV, held the “woman question” was “for the time being one of economic and educational” matters; “it is concerned with the right and ability of women to pursue professional work, and [it] leaves no room for discussions and demands of a political nature.” (“Aus der Literatur” 202)

Beginning in the mid-1860s, girls and women in Darmstadt benefitted from a fortuitous development of events. First, the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 revealed the need for trained nurses, and Princess Alice of Hesse-Darmstadt sought in early 1867 to implement her plan of training secular nurses for employment both in times of war and of peace. Second, Büchner penned her call for women and men in late March of the same year to found an association to improve educational and professional opportunities for women. For the next decade, the princess and Büchner, as president and vice-president of various associations, cooperated to solve the “woman question” as defined by Hirsch. Not only did they develop a symbiotic work relationship, they were also part of a network that allowed each one of them to reach out to other like-minded persons in their social
Büchner observed in 1873: “But the Princess does not lend [her] name to them [the women’s associations, C.S.] only, she is consistently busy with all of us; [she is] always present in person, and [she] sees, acts, and takes matters into her own hands whenever there is need” (“Alice” 941). Princess Alice’s support of Büchner’s efforts expedited the reforms on behalf of women in Hesse-Darmstadt that might otherwise have taken Büchner much longer to accomplish.

Earlier biographers of Büchner and historians described her variously as a member of the “liberal-conservative wing” of the women’s movement (Duboc 102–103), “a reasonably conservative feminist” (Joeres, “Ein Dichter” 32), a “conservatively revolutionary” thinker (Dierks, “Konservativ”), or a “supporter of the democratic liberal movement in 1848” (Allen 93). As the sister of Georg Büchner, she was also thought to be a “revolutionary,” who promoted traditional roles for women during the time of the Reaction (Strehler 140). In the mid-1980s, the Grünen (Green Party) and women’s organizations in Darmstadt paid tribute to her and her achievements (Anon. “Mit klarem”; Ronimi/Hausberg 43–44). The Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP; Free Democratic Party), the liberal party of Germany, claimed her, together with other nineteenth-century feminists such as Otto-Peters, as one of its earliest “liberal” leaders (Funcke 48). Examining these biographies of Büchner, I noticed that their authors invariably consulted only one of the first three editions of her DFuiB published before the organized women’s movement began in 1865. They did not take into account the fact that Büchner drew on insight gained from her practical work in organizing educational and professional programs for women and subsequently expanded the scope of the fourth edition of DFuiB in 1872 by 74.1% in number of words as against the third edition (Scharpf, Feminist 357).

My study of all four editions of DFuiB published during her lifetime demonstrates that Büchner, by words and deeds, was an evolutionary feminist, who advocated neither radical, nor revolutionary means for improving the status of women and contributing towards more equality of the sexes within a society undergoing changes due to industrialization and its socio-economic consequences. She worked from within the system with the help of influential men and women, seeking to effect gradual and lasting change to benefit humankind. Or,
as Dierks commented on her untiring work, Büchner did so in “a middle-class evolutionary spirit.” (“Luise Büchner” 82) Although the term “feminist” was not in use until the 1870s, she, and other women and men, supported “ideas that advocate the emancipation of women” (Offen 19). “Emancipation,” a term Büchner used in her writings, connotes “freedom from restraint or control, as of social conventions” (Merriam Webster 442). Büchner helped initiate some measures to emancipate women from too narrowly prescribed roles within their families and society. In other words, women’s emancipation was not just about making demands for women, it was about preparing them for their rightful place in society. She supported all efforts making them better qualified for their roles in society, which, she hoped, would eventually grant them full participation as equal members.

This book is intended as a contribution towards better understanding the protagonists and issues discussed in the first German women’s movement. It is a first book-length biography of Luise Büchner and a full assessment of her work as a writer and activist in the feminist cause. Taking her theoretical and literary work together makes clear that her literary representation of female protagonists was written with the purpose of influencing the upbringing, education, and professionalization of women as part of a broader social transformation. In her nonfictional and fictional work she posed critical questions to her readers and made observations that inspired them to think, rather than just read for pleasure.

Wherever possible, I use texts as published during her lifetime, because editorial changes were made in her posthumous publications. Since her writings are not readily available, I am summarizing them in detail to present the scope of her work. Writing for English-speaking readers, I present the quotations in translation for which I alone am responsible, unless otherwise noted. The originals in German can be found in their pertinent endnotes. I retain the nineteenth-century German spelling, while occasionally adding punctuation marks to facilitate comprehension.