



A Zola Dictionary: The Characters of the Rougon-Macquart Novels of Emile Zola

J G Patterson

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A Zola Dictionary The Characters of the Rougon-Macquart Novels of Emile Zola By J. G. Patterson Emile Zola was born at Paris on 2nd April, 1840. His father, Francois Zola, was a man whose career up to that time had not been a success, though this was not due to any lack of energy or ability. Zola pere was of mixed nationality, his father being an Italian and his mother a Greek, and it is not unlikely that his unrest and want of concentration were due to the accident of his parentage. When quite a young man, Francois fought under the great Napoleon, after whose fall he became a civil engineer. He spent some time in Germany, where he was engaged in the construction of the first tramway line in Europe, afterwards visiting Holland and possibly England. Failure seems to have accompanied him, for in 1831 he applied for and obtained an appointment, as lieutenant in the Foreign Legion in Algeria. His career in Africa was, however, of short duration; some irregularities were discovered, and he disappeared for a time, though ultimately he came forward and made up his accounts, paying the balance that was due. No prosecution took place, and resignation of his commission was accepted. Nothing more was heard of the matter till 1898, when his son Emile identified himself with the cause of Dreyfus, and in the campaign of calumny that followed had to submit to the vilest charges against the memory of his father. The old dossier was produced by the French Ministry of War, the officials of which did not hesitate to strengthen their case by the forgery of some documents and the suppression of others. In view of these proved facts, and of the circumstance that Francois Zola, immediately after his resignation from the Foreign Legion, established himself as a civil engineer at Marseilles and prepared a scheme for new maritime docks there, and that in connection with this scheme he visited Paris repeatedly, obtaining private audiences with the King and interviewing statesmen, it must be held that the charges against him were of a venial nature, in no way warranting the accusations brought forward by the War Office nearly seventy years later to cast discredit on his son. Nothing came of the Marseilles harbour scheme, and the same fate attended subsequent plans for the fortification of Paris. Zola pere, who by this time had married, then turned his attention to a proposal to supply water to the town of Aix, in Provence, by means of a reservoir and canal. He removed thither with his wife and child, and after many delays and disappointments ultimately signed an agreement for the construction of the works. Even then further delays took place, and it was not till three years later that the work could be commenced. But the engineer's ill fortune still attended him, for one morning while he was superintending his workmen the treacherous mistral began to blow, and he took a chill, from the effects of which he died a few days afterwards.

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