

# The Blue Plaque

Emile Zola

Nick Rennison

The son of an Italian engineer who had taken French citizenship, Emile Zola was born in Paris in 1840 and started his career working for a publisher and practising as a journalist. As a novelist he became the leading figure in French naturalism and his Rougon–Macquart novels form an epic, twenty–volume survey of the late nineteenth century, seen through the respective fortunes of two families.

Zola risked his literary career and reputation in the late 1890s when the Dreyfus Case, in which a Jewish army officer was wrongly accused of treason and imprisoned on Devil's Island, split France into Dreyfusards and anti–Dreyfusards. Zola became one of the most passionate and eloquent of Dreyfus's supporters and published an open letter in a newspaper attacking the military authorities and the French government. 'The truth is on the march,' he declared, 'and nothing can stop it.'

The government responded by stripping Zola of the Legion of Honour and charging him with criminal libel. He escaped to England to avoid imprisonment, staying at the Queen's Hotel in Upper Norwood which now carries a blue plaque. In exile Zola, an enthusiastic photographer who knew the area from earlier visits to London, spent much of his time taking pictures of Norwood and the nearby Crystal Palace.

After eleven months in England, Zola was allowed to return to France just in time to see the government fall and the Dreyfus case re-opened. Dreyfus was finally exonerated in 1906. Sadly Zola was not there to witness the triumph of justice. He had died four years earlier in a bizarre accident, suffocated by carbon monoxide fumes when his chimney became blocked.



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