

Confronting the Zola Conundrum. New Zealand Newspapers Respond to the Death of Émile Zola

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine à la fois les avis de décès attachés aux dépêches câblées annonçant la mort de Zola et les quatorze articles d'éditoriaux publiés dans une variété de journaux en Nouvelle-Zélande à partir d'octobre 1902. L'examen du ratio de mots alloués dans ces articles à trois principaux sujets de discussion (biographie, littérature, affaire Dreyfus) montre comment les journaux néo-zélandais tentèrent de résoudre l'énigme Zola et de réconcilier le défenseur admirable de Dreyfus avec l'auteur de romans sulfureux. Si, pour de nombreux journaux, Zola est soit l'auteur d'une littérature repréhensible, soit le courageux défenseur de Dreyfus, une façon possible d'envisager l'écrivain comme un tout émerge toutefois: sa défense de Dreyfus permet de jeter un voile sur sa production littéraire controversée ou invite même à la reconsidérer. Quatre journaux vont plus loin encore en prédisant qu'avec le temps les écrits de Zola seront mieux compris et n'auront plus besoin du rôle méritoire joué par leur auteur dans l'affaire Dreyfus pour être excusés. Il est ainsi suggéré que la postérité résoudra peut-être l'énigme Zola.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the obituaries attached to the cable reports of Zola's death and fourteen significant pieces of editorial material about Zola in a range of New Zealand newspapers from October 1902. The ratio of words allocated to each of the three broad areas of biography, literature, and the Dreyfus Affair forms the basis of an analysis of how New Zealand newspapers attempted to resolve the Zola conundrum or, in other words, how to reconcile the admirable defender of Dreyfus with the infamous author of scandalous novels. For many newspapers Zola is either the writer of objectionable literature or the courageous champion of Dreyfus. One possible way to gain a comprehensive view of Zola and his work emerges however – let his defence of Dreyfus draw a veil over or even invite a reconsideration of his controversial literary output. Four newspapers go further, predicting that in time Zola's writings will be better understood and will no longer need their author's meritorious involvement in the Dreyfus Affair to excuse them, thereby suggesting that perhaps posterity may resolve the Zola conundrum.

Both the Dreyfus Affair and Zola's literary career received extensive coverage in New Zealand newspapers as the opening sections of this article demonstrate. His death was an opportunity to confront the conundrum this polarizing figure represented – namely, how to reconcile his more recent incarnation as the brave and righteous defender of Dreyfus with his earlier reputation as the

author of supposedly filthy literature. An analysis of articles in a range of New Zealand newspapers from October 1902 explores how the journalists approached the Zola conundrum.

The Life of Émile Zola in New Zealand Newspapers

The National Library of New Zealand's digitizing of early New Zealand newspapers for its Papers Past website (<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>) has created a wonderful resource. There are 25 519 hits for "Zola" and, once we eliminate others with the name "Zola" who were not Émile Zola – for example, Antonio Zola, a prospector at the gold mines on the West Coast of the South Island or the *Egyptian Freemason, Grand Master Zola*, as well as a parade of horses and dogs called "Zola"¹ – there are still thousands of items referring to Émile Zola.

The first mention of Émile Zola in the New Zealand newspapers is in the *Star* where Zola, with his "strictest plebeian language," is compared unfavourably to Victor Hugo" (3 Aug. 1877: 2). Zola thus makes his first appearance in New Zealand newspapers in his capacity as an author, and his status as the poor literary relation of Victor Hugo endures for some years. Later, however, he appears in almost every column of the newspapers – news, literature, gossip, sport, judiciary, politics. As Ian F. Grant observes, "personalities, the entertainment industry and disasters were staples of the press long before the twentieth century tabloids."² Émile Zola was a celebrity. For the *New Zealand Times*, "no living literary man has a wider reputation" (4 Aug. 1896: 2). His fame only increased after the Dreyfus Affair, at which point the *New Zealand Mail* identified him as "the best known Frenchman of his time" (13 June 1901: 25).

Zola's biography is frequently referred to, particularly his passage from poverty to great wealth: "Judged from the pecuniary point of view, M. Émile Zola is probably the most successful of living authors."³ His prolific output, impressive print runs and sales figures are fascinating. The fact that his position as the best-paid novelist in France is on the back of sensational novels, "prov[ing] that literary indecency in France is lucrative."⁴

There is plentiful literary criticism – and it is overwhelmingly critical. The adjectives applied to his work become a familiar refrain: unsavoury, repulsive, filthy, impure, vile, immoral, gross, daring, nasty, objectionable, obscene, and indecent. His works are considered either offensive or tedious.⁵ Even the "cleaner" post-*Rougon-Macquart* offerings fail to excuse what preceded them.⁶ The criminal charges laid against his translators, the seizure of his books, the prosecution of booksellers around the world guilty of selling his novels, including in Christchurch, New Zealand (in 1890), are all reported.

Further, Émile Zola is a staple feature of the columns containing gossip and anecdotes in New Zealand newspapers for the twenty-five years preceding his death. They recount his preferred pastimes (particularly cycling), diet, fondness for animals, superstitions, taste for curios, writing

¹ For example, *New Zealand Times* 5 Nov. 1898: 3. The use of accents in French words in the New Zealand newspapers is erratic. I have standardized the spelling.

² Ian F. Grant, *Lasting Impressions. The Story of New Zealand's Newspapers, 1840-1920* (Masterton: Fraser Books, 2018) 25.

³ *Oamaru Mail* 10 April 1885: 4.

⁴ *Lyttelton Times* 26 Aug. 1882: 3.

⁵ "M. Zola has just published a new edition of *Une page d'amour*, one of the least offensive but most tiresome of his novels." *Auckland Star* 31 Jan. 1885: 8.

⁶ "While admiring the great French novelist's undoubted genius for painstaking, he has written very much which had better far been left unwritten. 'Paris' is comparatively innocent of offence, but one cannot forget and forgive the wanton filth of 'La Terre', for instance." *New Zealand Mail* 16 June 1898: 12.

practices, and a great deal more, including his wish for a sudden death⁷ and his indecision about cremation.⁸ The *New Zealand Mail* section “People We Read About” seems an especially suitable place for Zola to feature – because New Zealanders were definitely reading and writing about Zola. Two lengthy letters addressed to the *New Zealand Herald* after Zola’s death illustrate that there were people in New Zealand who felt strongly about both his novels and his involvement in the Dreyfus Affair. One letter is a virulent critique of Zola’s filthy literature and his defence of the guilty Dreyfus,⁹ the other a more measured appraisal of Zola’s works from someone who had read them in French.¹⁰

From the 1880s onwards there are dozens of references to Émile Zola each year in the New Zealand newspapers and hundreds annually from the latter part of that decade and into the 1890s, culminating with 2488 in 1898, the year of the publication of “*J’accuse...!*” and Zola’s trial and exile, when accounts of his role in the Dreyfus Affair are resoundingly positive. In fact, Zola remains a subject of interest even in death with extensive coverage (910 documents) occurring in 1902.

The impression of Zola gleaned from New Zealand newspapers before his death is that of a contradictory figure. Once so reviled, Zola is now admired, not just for his championship of Dreyfus but also for his later work which finds more favour with literary critics. However, Zola is never discussed without reference to his earlier and more controversial output. Might a total literary rehabilitation – one to complement the military and civic rehabilitation of Dreyfus – be possible? Zola’s death provides an opportunity for the New Zealand newspapers to confront the conundrum presented by this man who has featured in their pages with increasing prominence over the past quarter of a century.

So, how do the New Zealand newspapers approach the vexed question of Zola? Here is what the *Star* (4 Oct. 1902: 4) offered its readers:

Poor Zola! The plucky battler for justice, the open-hearted giver of charity, the realistic and powerful writer, deserved a less ignominious doom. Probably the run on his works will now be temporarily tremendous ere most of them sink to eternal oblivion. But don’t let any of us be “had” like the French priest, who told the Bishop who caught him deep in one of Zola’s books that it was the “Life of St Nana.”

For all its brevity these words echo many of the main ideas about Zola which circulated in the New Zealand newspapers from the 1880s onwards, including the evocation of a rich vein of jokes about having to conceal one’s reading of Zola’s novels from parents and employers.

Critics have examined the treatment of Zola’s death in foreign publications. These studies show that Zola was a polarizing figure for the newspapers and their readers, whether located in Buenos Aires, Luxembourg, Naples, Rio de Janeiro or Barcelona. Although their focus is more on the unfolding story of his death, both Myriam Kohnen and Valeria De Gregorio Cirillo acknowledge they are discussing someone who generated polemics.¹¹ Francisco Lafarga’s article

⁷ “Émile Zola wrote lately in a lady’s ‘Livre de Confessions’ that his favourite occupation was writing; his favourite colour, red; his favourite flower, a rose; and his particular wish, a sudden death.” *New Zealand Herald* 1 April 1893: 3.

⁸ “My personal choice in the matter I have not yet considered”; “French Men of Letters and Cremation,” *South Canterbury Times* 13 July 1894: 3.

⁹ R.H. Bakewell. Letter. *New Zealand Herald* 11 Oct. 1902: 1.

¹⁰ A New Chum. Letter. *New Zealand Herald* 22 Oct. 1902: 3.

¹¹ Myriam Kohnen, “La mort d’Émile Zola vue par le presse luxembourgeoise,” *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 89 (2015): 269-284, 277; Valeria De Gregorio Cirillo, “La morte di Zola nel quotidiano di Napoli *Il Mattino*,” *Annali (Università degli studi di Napoli L’Orientale) Sezione romanza* 45 (2003): 407-23, 410.

shows that elements from Zola's life and works can be manipulated to please the readers of newspapers of different political and religious persuasions.¹²

Two articles propose different ways of resolving the Zola conundrum. In one, a eulogy at a civic funeral for Zola in Buenos Aires, by the Argentinian literary figure Leopoldo Lugones, examines the chronology of Zola's life and suggests that Zola's trajectory may be considered a progression from "écrivain" to "apôtre." Pierina Lidia Moreau explains: "De cet apôtre, va parler l'orateur, et cela à partir de deux points de vue: le romancier qui oriente la famille nouvelle et la Ville future, et le défenseur de Dreyfus."¹³

Since the literary scandal is attached to the former role of writer, the later Zola can enjoy untainted glory. Writing on the repercussion of Zola's death in the Brazilian press, Alvaro Simoes suggests that a second way to reconcile the controversial author with the admirable defender of Dreyfus is to look deeper and see that behind both is the same man with the same motivations:

Zola reçoit, au début du XX^e siècle, les hommages dus à un grand écrivain, en qui on reconnaît le dévouement à sa profession, la capacité de critique sociale, un génie épique et un intérêt sincère pour les problèmes sociaux de son temps. [...] Les textes ici analysés indiquent que l'engagement de Zola dans l'Affaire Dreyfus d'une part et ses derniers écrits, d'autre part, ont renforcé la perception de son intérêt sincère pour les questions politico-sociales, intérêt qui l'a conduit à défier des institutions aussi puissantes que l'Armée et l'Église.¹⁴

He recommends a re-evaluation of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, hinting that those texts have more in common than one might expect with *Les Trois Villes* and *Les Quatre Évangiles*. We might add here that they were all written by the man who wrote "*J'accuse...*!"

The Death of Émile Zola in New Zealand Newspapers

The documents found in New Zealand newspapers at the time of Zola's death fall into three categories. The first consists of the cabled news reports, that is, brief telegraphic accounts of the key details which are widely reported. The second category contains the obituaries attached to some of these cable reports. The third, and most significant, group of documents is a collection of fourteen pieces of editorial material devoted to Zola during October 1902. I have analysed these latter two categories in terms of the three broad areas of Zola's activity which were discussed in the New Zealand newspapers preceding his death: his biography (Zola the man), his literature (Zola the writer) and his role in the Dreyfus Affair (Zola the public figure). The precedence given to one or another of these themes indicates the newspaper's stance on Zola.

Each category of items offers the New Zealand newspapers progressively more opportunity to present their appraisal of Zola. The cables arrived in uniform format, allowing freedom only in the headlines ascribed to them or the choice made as to which sections to include. The cable obituaries, the majority drawing on pre-existing sources, could be edited and slanted, depending on the respective weight given to the three main areas of information. The editorial material, which is our principal focus, afforded the newspapers more freedom to deliver their judgment on Zola.

¹² Francisco Lafarga, "Octubre de 1902: La muerte de Zola en La Prensa de Barcelona," *Excavatio* 17 (2002): 21-32, 32.

¹³ Pierina Lidia Moreau, "La mort d'Émile Zola. Funérailles civiques à Buenos Aires. Le discours de Leopoldo Lugones," *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 72 (1998): 119-37, 134.

¹⁴ Alvaro Simoes, "La répercussion de la mort de Zola dans les périodiques brésiliens," *Excavatio* 20 (2005): 286-98, 297-98.

Cables

In October 1902 there were seventy-four newspapers published in New Zealand, a high figure as Ian F. Grant comments: “It has been largely overlooked that early New Zealand newspapers were a remarkable phenomenon. [...] During much of the nineteenth century there were more newspapers in New Zealand per head of population than anywhere else in the world.”¹⁵

New Zealand newspapers appear to have taken a fundamentally conservative direction at this time, given that their ownership and readership were both from the minority ruling social group. As Patrick Day notes, these were “class newspapers, linked predominantly with those men who were becoming both the major landowners and the dominant commercial groups in New Zealand.”¹⁶ Ian F. Grant considers that historians have overlooked “the imperative of advertising and circulation”¹⁷ and observes that New Zealand newspapers in this period are principally commercial enterprises, loyal to their advertisers and subscribers rather than politically aligned. According to the Papers Past website, most of those papers from which the editorial material discussed below is taken are either “conservative” or “liberal” – in the sense of supporting the Liberal Party, that is, centrist.

From the 1880s onwards the established telegraph system and “the cohesive national organization”¹⁸ of a press association monopoly “resulted in a uniform news service” with the cable news items being reproduced in identical text in newspapers across the country.¹⁹ Readers learnt of the death of Zola via seven cable items published on 30 September and in the early days of October 1902.

The first cable, which appeared in forty-two papers on either 30 September or 1 or 2 October 1902, announces the death of Zola and the circumstances of the accident. It also refers to the reception of the news in Europe, which is summarized by this headline in the *Taranaki Herald*: “Anti-Jews, Catholics and Newspapers Rejoice. Regret in England.”²⁰ The second instalment of cable news is about the funeral and appears in fifty newspapers on 2 and 3 October. There are two separate cables, with newspapers choosing which elements to report – the first received at 10:45 pm on 1 October and the second at 9:11 am on 2 October. The fullest accounts cover various aspects of the event: the funeral and fears of an anti-Dreyfus demonstration; Zola’s friends calling for a national funeral; Mme Zola’s response to the news of her husband’s death (“she shrieked and sobbed bitterly and sank into a deep stupor”²¹); the visit by Dreyfus to Zola’s coffin; and the suggestion in Catholic newspapers that Zola committed suicide.

The third piece of cable news announces that Zola’s funeral is to be delayed. It is published in twenty-six papers on 3 October. The fourth cable contains two pieces of information and forty-one papers publish them between 6 and 8 October, ordering the items differently or selecting only one.²² The first item, which comes from Paris, is Mme Zola’s request to Dreyfus that he not attend the funeral, “lest his presence should cause a disturbance.” The second, from London, estimates

¹⁵ Grant x. The 1901 census calculated the population of New Zealand at 815 862.

¹⁶ Patrick Day, *The Making of the New Zealand Press 1840-1880* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1990) 6.

¹⁷ Grant 37.

¹⁸ Day 238.

¹⁹ Ross Harvey, “Bringing the News to New Zealand: The Supply and Control of Overseas News in the Nineteenth Century,” *Media History* 8 (2002): 21-34, 21.

²⁰ 1 Oct. 1902: 3. The *Star* qualifies this as “ill-mannered rejoicing.” 1 Oct. 1902: 3.

²¹ *Marlborough Express* 2 Oct. 1902: 1.

²² Only the *Akaroa Mail* publishes the funeral related details alone, whereas the *Bay of Plenty Times*, *North Otago Times* and *Bruce Herald* refer only to the estate.

the value of Zola's estate (£80,000). The *Evening Post*, *Auckland Star* and *Manawatu Herald* all put the estate valuation first, reflecting perhaps their readership's enduring interest in Zola's wealth.

The fifth cable covers the funeral itself. Published by thirty-nine newspapers between 7 and 10 October, the news appears under headings, such as the following: "A Great Ceremonial";²³ "A Harmonious Apotheosis. Tributes to His Manliness. Ovations to Socialists";²⁴ "Impressive Funeral. Eloquent Panegyrics";²⁵ and "A Remarkable Tribute. Enormous and Respectful Crowds."²⁶ The sixth cable report, published by twenty-nine newspapers between 8 and 15 October, covers a duel sparked by one man's accusation that another had shaken the hand of Dreyfus at Zola's funeral. The seventh item of cable news, published by thirty-four newspapers between 11 and 15 October, details the ongoing investigation into Zola's death – with a mention of the use of guinea pigs to assess the levels of gas in Zola's bedroom.

For the rest of 1902 and beyond, the consequences of Zola's death continue to be given prominence, with topics as speculation as to his wife's financial state,²⁷ the sale of his effects which include artworks, guinea pigs and 5000 bottles of wine,²⁸ and the proposed uses for his property at Médan.²⁹ Not surprisingly, his death is used as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unventilated bedrooms.³⁰ The evaluation of his literary contribution is ongoing and regular, and his name features in various repercussions of the Dreyfus Affair. A sustained resurgence of interest appears in 1906 (186 items) with the first calls for Zola's pantheonisation and, in 1908, there is significant coverage (284 items) of that ceremony and the debates which precede it.

Cable Obituaries

There are twenty obituaries, ranging in length from 8 to 227 lines, attached to the cable reports of Zola's death. Half of them clearly draw on *Hazell's Annual – a Cyclopaedic Record of Men, and Topics of the Day*, which was considered an "excellent publication, indispensable in newspaper offices."³¹ Almanacs and encyclopedias were a common source of copy in the colonial era. Ian F. Grant refers to "'cut and paste' from overseas publications"³² as part of the standard content of most newspapers. Newspapers also sourced material from other newspapers, sometimes with

²³ *Southland Times* 7 Oct. 1902: 2.

²⁴ *Taranaki Herald* 7 Oct. 1902: 2.

²⁵ *Hawke's Bay Herald* 7 Oct. 1902: 3.

²⁶ *Press* 7 Oct. 1902: 5.

²⁷ "Zola's widow, too, it appears, possesses scarcely more than a living income." *Evening Post* 31 Jan. 1903: 4.

²⁸ "Émile Zola's collection of objects of art, books, tapestries etc., and including many rarities, was sold by auction on March 9." *Auckland Star* 13 April 1903: 1; "Five thousand bottles of wine, two milch cows, and thirty-six guinea pigs are among the household effects of the late Émile Zola, which have been advertised for public sale in Paris." *Patea Mail* 19 July 1905: 2.

²⁹ "A fund has been opened in France for the purpose of buying the late M. Zola's property at Médan as the site of an asylum for homeless poets and authors." *Poverty Bay Herald* 2 Dec. 1903: 2; "Madame Zola has presented to the city of Paris, for a convalescent home, the house at Médan." *Press* 8 July 1905: 7.

³⁰ "Lack of Open Windows. A Valuable Hygiene Lesson." *Lyttelton Times* 8 Jan. 1903: 6; "The Air We Breathe." *Otago Witness* 22 April 1903: 64. In late November 1902 dozens of New Zealand newspapers covered the conviction in England of a gas company for failing to make safe an old pipe. Several used Zola's name in the item's title, for example: "Narrow Escape from a Fate similar to that of M. Zola. Warning to Gas Companies," *Otago Daily Times* 20 Nov. 1902: 7.

³¹ *Hawke's Bay Herald* 30 Jan. 1902: 2.

³² Grant 13.

attribution, more often without, as Patrick Day describes: “[I]t was accepted that newspapers would copy from one another and much news reporting was by judicious use of.”³³ This explains the presence of similar turns of phrase, if not identical cable obituaries for Zola, in New Zealand newspapers.

Of most interest to us are the nine cable obituaries of more than fifty lines long where the topic “literature” dominates. Acknowledging that Zola is not “the best-loved of men these times,” the *Lyttelton Times* takes a neutral stance, referring to the “many vicissitudes” Zola faced in his “remarkable career” (1 Oct. 1902: 7-8). There is no mention of the controversy his work generated, nor the criticism he received. Similarly, the *Evening Star* concludes that Zola’s “best-known works are ‘Nana’, ‘La Terre’, ‘La Débâcle’, ‘Lourdes’ and ‘Rome’,” without mention of how the respective novels were received, although there may be a clue in the headline titled “The Great Realist” (30 Sept. 1902: 6).

Other newspapers, however, take a clear position. The *Auckland Star* lists all the titles in *Les Rougon-Macquart* and refers to difficulties encountered by translators and sellers of Zola’s “ultra-realistic” works (30 Sept. 1902: 6). For the *Hawke’s Bay Herald* Zola was “perhaps the best known writer in Europe during the last decade or two” and enjoyed record sales of his novels (1 Oct. 1902: 3). This is the only newspaper to mention naturalism, observing that Zola did not practice what he preached but rather revealed himself to be “an idealist rather than a realist.” The article concludes that his “passion for often uninteresting detail, his parade of scientific theory, his preoccupations with the unclean side of life, have interfered with his popularity.” Similarly, *The Evening Post* makes the point that “unfortunately for Zola’s fame, many of his novels are disfigured by moral grossness of the worst kind” (30 Sept. 1902: 5). It is dubious as to whether Zola contributed to “the sum total of human advancement and happiness,” the *Marlborough Express* concludes: “[T]he pity is that the harm done to the mass of people by the apparent immorality and grossness of his books is not compensated for by whatever merit there is in their real purpose” (1 Oct. 1902: 1).

It is noteworthy that those cable obituaries which focus on literature underline the negative, perhaps none as strongly as the *New Zealand Times* which finds that Zola’s “moral grossness” caters to “lovers of the obscene and nasty” (1 Oct. 1902: 5). It claims that statistics show: “[T]hose in which bestial coarseness appeared most flagrantly have had the greatest sale. The demand diminishes [...] in exact proportion as the layer of obscenity spread by Zola over his work with a mason’s trowel becomes more thin and less evil-smelling.”

A different tone appears in the *Otago Daily Times* which brings up *L’Assommoir* and the “outcries as to its immorality” before commending Zola’s contribution to the Dreyfus case in strong terms. Suggesting that his involvement serves as a counterweight to the aforementioned “immorality,” the journalist states: “Zola, once convinced of the injustice that had been done, and supremely careless of all personal consequences, compelled France and the entire world to listen to his case” (1 Oct. 1902: 5).

The cable obituaries state the facts but leave the Zola conundrum unresolved – the relative importance given to either the literature or elements of the Dreyfus Affair only hint at the newspaper’s view. There is, however, one cable obituary (and at 227 lines it is the longest) which suggests that it might be possible to view Zola’s output as a whole. The article in the *Press* opens with Zola described as the “great French novelist,” the “courageous author” and “one of the forces to be reckoned with in contemporary literature,” although *La Terre* is “appallingly repulsive” (1 Oct. 1902: 7). Zola’s “real offence was making himself a mouthpiece of the intelligent and

³³ Day 61.

thoughtful portion of the French public.” The article concludes with a quotation from an unnamed biographer of Zola, who claims that “[p]osterity will look beyond the studied intemperance of his language and will see in him a man who refused to sit still while a great wrong was being perpetrated.”

This mention of Zola the man evokes Alvaro Simoes’s conclusion and is echoed in some of the editorial material discussed below. Further, the mention of “posterity” and the idea of judgment being deferred prefigure what might be the New Zealand newspapers’ best attempt at resolving the Zola conundrum in their editorial material of October 1902.

Editorial Material – October 1902

Fourteen pieces of significant editorial material about Émile Zola were published in New Zealand newspapers during October 1902.³⁴ Literature is the focus in eleven whereas the other three devote their attention to the Dreyfus Affair. While the first cables consisted of blunt facts and the cable obituaries offered a preliminary taking of position, these fourteen documents are the more representative opinions of the New Zealand newspapers.

The *Manawatu Standard* takes Zola the writer as the principal subject of its editorial piece (7% biography, 77% literature, 16% Dreyfus) even if it begins with an acknowledgement of his “courage in connection with the Dreyfus case” (1 Oct. 1902: 2). The journalist is of the opinion that Zola’s novels represent an “undue catering, as some think, to a morbid interest of the seamy side of life” and is unpersuaded by Zola’s self-proclaimed duty to expose “the evil genius gnawing at and corroding the vitals of French society.” Although he believes the author misconceived of “his proper functions as an artist and a man of letters,” he concludes on a conciliatory note: “We do not suppose for a moment that Zola’s peculiar pen pictures gave him pleasure, but we hardly think the world is much richer for the description of writing mentioned. Of late years M. Zola’s novels have been of a more acceptable nature.”

For this newspaper Zola’s defence of Dreyfus is not enough to overlook, let alone reconsider, literary issues. On the other hand, four newspapers invite their readers to focus on the author’s recent gallant championship of Dreyfus. Although acknowledging the enduring criticism of Zola’s earlier literary efforts, they thus draw a veil over the earlier controversial novels.

A ninety-seven-line editorial (3% biography, 58% literature, 39% Dreyfus) in the *Auckland Star* opens with a reference to how in England “the popular prejudice against him [Zola] as a novelist holds its ground” (4 Oct. 1902: 4). The journalist recognizes that Zola’s works “have no immoral tendency” and that their author made vice “repellent” but finds that realism “can never be true art.” He claims that “Zola was at heart an idealist, though in manner a realist” and cites *La Débâcle* in support, while judging the rest of the *Rougon-Macquart* novels “dull” although useful as historical documents. Here is the transition to his remarks on Zola’s defence of Dreyfus: “Yet, in spite of his varied knowledge, his ceaseless industry and the gigantic circulation that his works attained, Émile Zola was not so great a novelist as he was a man.” The journalist then describes the scope of the task which Zola, a “brave and truly patriotic man,” took on in his defence of “the lamentable Dreyfus”:

At a time when there was nothing to be gained by saying a word for Dreyfus but obloquy and personal peril, when the Army, the Church, and the Press of France

³⁴ In this category I have excluded four announcements of the impending release in London of Ernest Vizetelly’s translation of *Vérité* and three space fillers which read more like cable obituaries derived from *Hazell’s Annual*.

were banded together to defend the crime which had locked the prison door on Dreyfus, Zola stepped boldly into the breach and defied them all. [...] All that he dared and endured in defending Dreyfus established his claim to immortality far more effectually than his multitudinous novels.

In “The Late Émile Zola” (182 lines, 6% biography, 87% literature and 7% Dreyfus), the *Marlborough Express* views Zola as one of the “most distinguished figures in modern French literary history,” noting nonetheless that while the “genuine earnestness of the man is unquestionable,” his “undeniably forceful work was marred (to the taste at least of English readers) by his all too frequent coarse brutality of expression” (18 Oct. 1902: 1). His works are “frankly, wilfully obscene,” an “undeniable filthiness” and “morbid exaggeration.” The journalist who explores Zola’s method and his realism, giving the titles of many of *Les Rougon-Macquart* novels, writes: “In ‘Nana’ and ‘La Terre’, Zola out-Zolas ‘Zolaism’, and undoubtedly went beyond the bounds of what might be considered, even in French fiction, justifiable realism; and alienated the sympathies and respect of many of his English admirers.”

The newsman regrets that, in the later cycles of novels, Zola’s “style, always heavy and tedious, grew more and more verbose” and made these works “very hard reading,” *Fécondité* being “both dirty and dull.” He does not believe that Zola’s “books will live” but acknowledges that the novelist was “an honest capable man of letters [...] and by no means the least able nor the least successful of French social reformers.” Highlighting Zola’s role in the Dreyfus Affair, he states: “But it is not as a great novelist that M. Zola has in recent years been so well known, but as the champion, the ardent, courageous, gallantly out-spoken champion of the foully ill-used Dreyfus.”

Taking a similar view in a sixty-seven-line article (0% biography, 34% literature, 66% Dreyfus) the *Otago Witness* notes that Zola is a “power in literature” and that his “undoubted talents and immense industry” were, alas, “not turned to better account, for even after crediting him with the best of intentions, it is difficult to imagine that the world is the better for his writings” (8 Oct. 1902: 47-48). The journalist accepts that Zola had a moral purpose but that his “positively repulsive” realism pandered “to the morbid fancies which run riot in ill-regulated minds,” before concluding: “It is impossible, however, whatever his faults, to think evil of a man who so nobly championed the cause of the unfortunate Alfred Dreyfus, and it is for this chivalrous action, rather than for anything he has written, that his name will be handed down to generations yet unborn.”

The *Press* starts its editorial (172 lines 2% biography, 85% literature, 13% Dreyfus) by stating that Zola’s death will shock even “those who regard his influence on the world as largely, if not wholly, evil” (1 Oct. 1902: 6). The journalist devotes over a quarter of the article to denouncing realism as “the idealisation of the evil” and fails to find any acceptable justification for such writing, which seems either it is “to wallow in pessimism” or “to pander to the worst feelings of humanity in order to make money out of them.” Like the *Auckland Star* this newspaper makes a distinction between Zola the man and Zola the writer, conceding that there is “evidence to show that Zola was not a man of utterly degraded tastes” and that someone motivated by popularity and money alone would never have jumped to the defence of Dreyfus.

Fécondité is praised, not least because it lacks the “offensive elements” of *Nana* and other novels in the *Rougon-Macquart* series which were “open to grave condemnation,” the journalist concluding that the “man who wrote it could not have been an altogether degraded man.” While *Paris* and *Rome* are considered “capable,” they are also proof of the “truism that Zola is not an artist” – an opinion which is, however, undermined somewhat by the fact that the journalist names *Londres* as one book in the *Trois Villes* cycle. The article’s conclusion suggests that Zola’s defence of Dreyfus should be what remains uppermost in an appraisal of the man: “But ‘respect aux morts’

is a kindly thought, and whatever harm Zola may have done, we may at least think well of the man who stretched forth a helping hand to the wretched Dreyfus in his hour of need.”

There is one strident opposing voice, that of a regular contributor to the *New Zealand Herald* who uses the pen-name Tohunga.³⁵ In “Zola in Art” (224 lines, 9% biography, 79% literature, 12% Dreyfus), this journalist insists that Zola’s defence of Dreyfus should not affect the judgment on Zola the artist: “The place of Zola in Art is not altered one iota by his attitude in the Dreyfus affair. He may have been a good man, but he was a poor artist” (4 Oct. 1902: 1).

For Tohunga, Zola’s poor art is due to his not being “imbued with one single drop of the sympathy which alone can embalm any work of literary art,” an issue he ascribes to the fact that Zola suffers from “the curse of the alien-blooded,” an allusion to Zola’s Italian paternal line. Tohunga even ventures the opinion that Zola’s “cross-bred” status may have motivated him to help the similarly “alien-blooded” Dreyfus. He further scoffs at the “pretentious theory” behind the “moralless volumes” of *Les Rougon-Macquart*:

When the history of French Art in the Nineteenth Century comes to be written there can be no possibility of doubt that the refusal of the French Academy to elect Zola to fellowship will be completely justified by the mildew which will encrust his every volume. He has been made a “famous” author by the same process as that which made John Wilkes a “famous” patriot. He was policed into a notoriety which was mistaken for fame, and it has been a serious matter since to question his superiority. [...] And he has not produced a single character which is immortal, a single scene which brands itself upon the world’s consciousness, a single page which will live.

Tohunga’s view may be somewhat discredited by the racial slurs he includes in his article, and some may see him disqualified as a literary critic by his conclusion that no realist author has “ever produced work which will live and influence us as long as will *Lorna Doone*.”

Other newspapers suggest that once Zola’s literary project is properly understood his earlier literary activities will not need to be excused or counterbalanced by his defence of Dreyfus. For the *Evening Star* attitudes towards Zola have changed and continue to change. With its focus on Zola the writer (80% literature, 17% Dreyfus and 3% biography) the 117-line piece begins as follows:

The death of M. Émile Zola removes a conspicuous figure, a masterful personality, and a man of far-reaching influence from the world’s stage. There was a time when his books were read by the hundreds of thousands, and his name tabooed in all decent society. At the hour when he passed away his works were still read, and will doubtless continue to be read; but his name has been redeemed from much of its earlier taint. He had become better known. His life, his motives, his teachings were presented not in parts (and those the baser), but as a whole. To simply read ‘Nana’ or ‘La Terre’ in ignorance of the man and his work would be to create a sense of moral contamination and a feeling of intense loathing towards their author which, however admirable, and justifiable on the premises, could not be maintained at the bar of impartial criticism, and with his life history laid bare to us. Zola was at times gross, nasty, and indecent, but he was not deliberately immoral.

³⁵ A Maori word designating an expert practitioner of any skill or art, often a priestly scholar.

The journalist claims that Zola did not make vice attractive and compares the novelist's "brutal, degrading, repulsive" depiction of vice with Maupassant's "frank worship at the shrine of the goddess of lubricity." He also invokes Zola's industrious preparatory work in his favour, before ending the article with reference to his role in the Dreyfus Affair. Qualifying "*J'accuse...!*" as "that wonderful and world-shaking document," he describes Zola's choice to write it as "one of the most self-sacrificing, unselfish, and heroic in modern times" (2 Oct. 1902: 4).

Going beyond the view in the *Evening Star* that Zola was not "deliberately immoral," the editorial in the *Otago Daily Times* (forty-three lines, 0% biography, 35% literature, 65% Dreyfus) concludes:

Amongst British people, those whose judgment of Zola is severest are those who knew him least. For my own part I credit him with lofty moral aims, not only in the Dreyfus business, but in the huge and populous theatre of his novels – and of all that he wrote there is little that I have not read. I see no reason why a self-respecting Briton should refuse to drop a flower upon Zola's tomb. (11 Oct. 1902: 4)

The notion of "posterity" mentioned in the cable obituary in the *Press* is further developed in four pieces of editorial material which sketch a possible New Zealand resolution of the Zola conundrum – namely to wait and see. These articles published in October 1902 suggest that a lapse of time may provide the perspective necessary for an impartial assessment of Zola's achievements, literary and otherwise, taken as a whole.

The article leading the editorial column in the *Greymouth Evening Star* characterizes the death of the "powerful writer" as "somewhat tragic." In forty-six lines (22% biography, 65% literature, 13% Dreyfus) it defends Zola, suggesting that "his works have been misinterpreted by many simply because he chose to speak plainly and did not wrap up and clothe corruption in a mass of fine words and sentences" (1 Oct. 1902: 2). For the journalist, those who termed Zola's literature "filthy" had "misunderstood his writings." Here, Zola's involvement with the Dreyfus Affair is not required to excuse his novels but represents instead an impressive patriotic service. Unlike other articles of the same time which predict that Zola's literary work was unlikely to endure, this article concludes with a different forecast, one of rehabilitation: "In time to come Zola's works will be better understood, and their true intention – that of reforming abuses – appreciated." This appraisal finds an echo in a short article in the *Wairarapa Daily Times*:

It will be interesting to see what the critics have to say about Émile Zola, now that he has "passed out". They gave him plenty of attention in his life-time. Too much was always made of his realism, and his philanthropic purpose was as much lost sight of as the magnificent power exhibited in his pages. To English minds his style was at times revolting; but it produced no such effect on French minds. His realism [...] was certainly not calculated to make vice attractive. The earnest and serious purpose of his "*Germinal*" for instance more than redeemed the objectionable minuteness with which he depicted the dreadful life of the pits. And there are numberless passages of his that will secure for him the rank of a classic. (8 Oct. 1902: 2)

The idea that time must pass before a judgment can be delivered on Zola is also suggested by an article in the *Colonist* which anticipates a biography of Zola which "if well done [...] will be an interesting one" (15 Oct. 1902: 2). In an eighty-five-line article (22% biography, 69% literature, 9% Dreyfus) the journalist wonders whether Zola's novels – which were "so horrible

and at the same time so powerful” – were “commodities so manufactured as to fetch a great price” or should be viewed “as moral productions to improve mankind.” He claims that Zola “never tried to make vice attractive” but rather made “vice hideous and the results appalling.” The article concludes by suggesting that attitudes towards Zola are by no means fixed:

In England, as well as in his own country, M. Zola’s experience has been strange. His English publisher was prosecuted, and suffered punishment for selling his novels, but their author, when he visited the country not long after, was received with high honour. In France a few years ago he was one of the most unpopular of men, on account of his strenuous efforts to obtain justice for Captain Dreyfus. In this he had the admiration of all who were not driven off their heads by prejudice or fanaticism, or acted from even worse motives. Now that he is dead it is evident either that many who at one time reviled him have seen the error of their ways, or that those who sympathised with him were more numerous than they were usually believed to be.

George William Von Zedlitz, professor of modern languages at Victoria University College (Wellington) contributed to the *New Zealand Times* a lengthy article (at 468 lines it is the longest of the editorial pieces), which, unsurprisingly, favours literature (65%) over Dreyfus (23%) and biography (12%). According to Von Zedlitz, Zola “harboured vast ideals in art, and accomplished them by unremitting labour” as well as showing “the highest moral and civil courage openly in the face of the world, and before the eye of history” (13 Oct. 1902: 7). The scholar goes on to explore the contradiction inherent in the fact of being able to admire Zola the man but not Zola the writer:

To many people in France and elsewhere the name of Zola stands for indecency and no more. The question how far this impression is justified can hardly be dealt with in narrow limits. Many people to whom indecency as such is repulsive cannot help admiring and respecting Zola and his work in spite of it, and they naturally try to find explanations of this contradiction. To many, the patent honesty of the man is enough; of all moral sermons, of all scathing condemnations of vice, of all merciless exposures of its inevitable results, none can surpass the indecent books of Zola.

Zola does not need his defence of Dreyfus to gain admiration. Von Zedlitz recognizes that tastes are changing, cultural differences are at play and “this much may be safely said, any one who can tolerate the occasional license of Shakespeare need have no fear of Zola.” He devotes dozens of lines to Zola’s method of preliminary documentation and his writing practices; further, he explores the theory that enemies whom Zola made in his early days as an artistic and literary critic were responsible for peddling the “notion that Zola was specially indecent” even though “a dozen others could be named as indecent and far less moral.” Zola’s involvement in the Dreyfus Affair “revived the storm of interested obloquy, long after all impartial critics had accepted the master’s faults and merits as an inseparable whole.”

The *Taranaki Herald* allocates a full three quarters of its 129-line article to Zola the writer (13% biography, 76% literature, 11% Dreyfus) and offers a brief account of the output from his “powerful and prolific pen” (4 Oct. 1902: 3), before making the following significant statement: “It is not within our province to criticise these works in detail. And perhaps the time has hardly yet come to fix accurately and impartially Émile Zola’s place in literature.” The journalist then

addresses the “apparent puzzle” of why Zola’s “name is now held in considerable esteem by thousands who would have once branded it with execration.” There are shades here of Alvaro Simoes’s view that the same man who defended Dreyfus wrote all the novels:

The explanation of this change in the opinion held of him is not simply the fact that he has to some extent atoned for his outrages on good taste years ago by the higher reverence for purity and virtue he has shown in recent days. It lies deeper than that. From first to last Émile Zola has been an artist whose works have had among other objects the aim of illustrating the ruthless inexorable working of the laws of heredity and environment.

The journalist explains that Zola has moved from “repulsive, revolting pictures” to “cleaner illustrations” of the same points, reminding us that the “artist’s point of view is the same.” The article builds to the following crescendo:

But one thing we shall never forget viz., that the man who fought more heroically than any other against the brutal injustice done to Dreyfus was Émile Zola. The man who wrote as he wrote and suffered as he suffered has every right to demand that now he is gone the world shall think of him at his best. We can only regret that his untimely death has prevented him from being able to add to the noble services he has already rendered not only to literature, but also to humanity.

So, how do the New Zealand newspapers approach the Zola conundrum? To what extent is the author of the controversial work *Les Rougon-Macquart* redeemed by his later literary efforts and his role in the Dreyfus Affair? For over half of the New Zealand newspapers discussed above, the latter element is likely to be the more enduring and will operate, to some extent, as an excuse to draw a veil over the former. For the *Marlborough Express* Zola was a better man than he was a writer, while the *Press*, even if it takes the same view, accepts that the post-*Rougon-Macquart* novels atone to some extent for those which went before, a position shared by the *Manawatu Standard*, *Auckland Star* and *Taranaki Herald*.

The *New Zealand Herald* and the *Otago Witness* agree that Zola’s literary works were harmful but commend him for his championship of Dreyfus. For the *Evening Star* Zola was not deliberately immoral and, in any case, his glorious defence of Dreyfus should afford him some latitude. In the *New Zealand Herald*, Tohunga, in contrast, is clear that Zola’s heroic support of an innocent man should not affect the judgment on his art; whereas the *Otago Witness* opines that his role in the Dreyfus Affair makes it impossible to think evil of the novelist. The *Otago Daily Times* credits Zola with “lofty aims” in both his writing and his defence of Dreyfus. This belief in Zola’s fundamental sincerity, as identified by Alvaro Simoes is perhaps the first step towards resolving the Zola conundrum and being able to see that the same man wrote both controversial novels and “*J’accuse...!*”

These newspapers appear to have reached their judgment on Zola, while a handful of others are prudently deferring to posterity the ultimate decision on Zola. Like the *New Zealand Times*, the *Greymouth Star* sees Zola the writer as misunderstood and his works misinterpreted, predicting that “in time” his works will be better understood. This view is shared by the *Wairarapa Daily Times*. Similarly, the *Colonist* and the *Taranaki Herald* believe that attitudes toward Zola are already changing, and the jury is still out.

While there is universal agreement that Zola’s reputation is much enhanced by his defense of Dreyfus, there is less agreement on how he should be appraised as a writer, and it is principally

as a writer that the vast majority of the cable obituaries and the editorial material consider Zola. They cannot resolve the Zola conundrum but, with the exception of the *New Zealand Herald*, invite their readers, on the basis of the novelist's role in the Dreyfus Affair, to extend some tolerance towards the more challenging parts of his literary output.

One group of New Zealand newspapers plays the longer game, suggesting that the Zola conundrum may, in time, be resolved once his literary project is better understood. His defence of Dreyfus will eternally remain to his credit while what the *Auckland Star* terms the "popular prejudice against him as a novelist" is bound to shift to some degree. Zola's pantheonization in 1908 provided an opportunity for New Zealand newspapers to revisit Zola. The *Evening Star* reflects:

The Academy would not accept him as an author; the Pantheon receives his dust. [...] The contrast is striking. Incidentally it illustrates the folly of forming judgments on our contemporaries. History is always being rewritten, for in Zola's own words, "La vérité est en marche, et rien ne l'arrêtera." (21 Mar. 1908: 8)

The folly of forming judgments on our contemporaries is all the more tempting in the case of a polarizing figure such as Zola, whom many viewed as either black or white. But Émile Zola is, just like Mr. F.H. Wood's horse of the same name, not only highly commended but also grey, the very colour of a conundrum. Unable to reconcile the admirable champion of Dreyfus with the infamous author of controversial novels, in the immediate wake of Zola's death, most of the New Zealand newspapers plump for one or the other version of him. A few, however, predict that a better understanding of Zola's vast literary project may see in it the same moral position and sincerity which were universally celebrated in "*J'accuse...!*". In short, time may resolve the Zola conundrum.