

Nevil Shute: Author, Entrepreneur, and Conservative

by [Roger Watson](#) (September 2025)



Study for Dark Day Long Island (Rick Amor, 2012)

There were Nevil Shute novels on our bookshelves when I was young. I forget which ones. But they would have been amongst those delivered monthly from the LBC (London Book Club) to which my mother subscribed. Other notable books were the Bond

books by Ian Fleming, The Saint books by Leslie Charteris and various others, including Dennis Wheatley. I read many of the Bond, Saint and Satanist books under the covers, and probably unbeknownst by my parents. But I never read anything by Nevil Shute until I was much older—about 40 years older. I recently set myself the pleasant task of completing his *oeuvre*.

When UK mod/punk band The Jam sang *A Town called Malice*, I knew it reminded me of something. It was only when I came across *A Town Like Alice* by Nevil Shute in a second-hand bookshop that I realised the literary allusion to which Paul Weller of The Jam had been referring. I bought the book and it stayed on my shelves, unread, for many years. Eventually it was lost, unread, in a house move.

My work later involved, for a few years, several visits to Australia annually, including one to Alice Springs, the 'Alice' of Shute's novel. Speaking to family members in Australia, I realised the influence of Shute on Australian literature. His novels *A Town Like Alice* and *On The Beach* had been, for my cousins, on the school curriculum. Having read nothing by Shute, and probably attracted by the short title, I began with *On The Beach*. I could barely put it down. The writing flowed, the story took shape, the characters developed and the full horror of what a post-nuclear world might look like was vivid. In fact, Shute was one of the earliest post-apocalyptic novelists, not a theme he ever returned to, and certainly the first to portray what the consequences may be in the Southern Hemisphere of a mutually destructive nuclear war in the Northern Hemisphere.

The Australians claim Shute as one of their own and, indeed, five of his over twenty novels, including *On The Beach*, are situated in Australia. Clearly *A Town Like Alice* is situated, eventually, in Australia and was the next one I read. The story begins in Scotland and then traces the journey of some female prisoners of war being moved through Malaya by their Japanese captors. The second half of the book takes place in

Australia. Again, the book is gripping, especially the first half, and the second half portrays the pioneering days in the heat and humidity of Cairns in Northern Queensland. Spoiler alert: none of the action takes place in Alice Springs, but 'Alice' is portrayed iconically by one of the characters whose plan is to return and live there.

From England to the Outback

However, despite being identified in most people's minds with Australia, Shute, or Nevil Shute Norway, was born in England in 1899 and spent the first 51 years of his life there. He only moved to Australia in 1950. That the move was prompted by his dislike of the increasing amount of tax that had to be paid in Britain betrays something of his conservative tendencies.

Shute was a mathematician by training (University of Oxford) and became involved in aeronautical engineering. He was a key figure in the airship industry and was one of the designers of the R100, the sister ship to the disastrous R101. That famous crash in France, killing most of the occupants and many of the airship engineers involved in the R101 project ended the airship dream in Britain. R100 was scrapped, literally.

Shute maintained throughout the project and long after that R100 was the superior ship. It made a successful journey to Canada and Shute's autobiographical *Slide Rule* describes the journey and conditions on the airship vividly. The construction of the R100 in the East Riding of Yorkshire had been set up in competition to the construction of the R101 at Cardington. R100 was to be constructed solely by private enterprise and investment whereas R101 was to be constructed with state funding.

The then-Labour government wanted to demonstrate the superiority of state funded projects. But the R101 instead

demonstrated the abject failure of such projects compared with private enterprise. The ship was technically flawed, which possibly contributed to its crash and explosion, subject to the whims of the government committee overseeing the project and was rushed into undertaking its maiden voyage and at vastly greater cost than the R100.

Shute learned a great deal from the project and, demonstrating his far-sightedness, genius, and his view that air travel was the future, he established an aircraft company with which he worked for twenty years. They struggled to make a profit but did build and sell some notable small aircraft. Shute reflects in *Slide Rule* on the people he met both in establishing his company and during the R100 project.

He concludes that there is much to recommend the involvement of the monied classes, landowners and life peers in politics. Their independence of mind and general disinterest in reputation or riches inevitably led to better decision making than professional politicians. The latter had to beware of their reputation and income thus making them more compliant to their political masters and more likely to stick with bad projects and bad decisions rather than express what they really thought or to abandon hopeless causes. The R101 was, to Shute, a case in point.

Novel enterprise

Shute, while married, was mostly living apart from his young wife as his job entailed. He favoured gentlemen's clubs, and it was there, in the long evenings and as a distraction from the difficulties he faced at work, that he started writing. Naturally, he faced rejection of early efforts but eventually found some modest success with his debut novel *Marazan*.

Generally, while they do allude to traditional values of hard work, loyalty and patriotism, Shute's novels are not overtly

political. Nevertheless, his third novel *Lonely Road*, does portray espionage involving Communist Party members and the reader is left in no doubt about the author's views on left-wing socialism. In fact, he makes little effort to distinguish communism and Labour Party socialism.

The language used in Shute's novels would have today's sensitivity readers doing cartwheels. His language would be considered both racist and misogynist. Women are the weaker sex, generally unfit for certain occupations but, when stepping up to the plate in any way, are always given credit. Aboriginals in the Australian novels are described by a range of epithets, people are ascribed characteristics based on their race, be they Chinese, African or European and black people are frequently referred to, from the mouths of unpleasant characters, as 'niggers.'

However, Shute was no racist and his abhorrence for prejudice based on nationality, culture or skin colour is specifically explored in several novels. *The Chequer Board*, in which the lives of several ex-servicemen are interwoven, includes a black American soldier in wartime England. The poor treatment of black soldiers around their bases in England is explored by way of separate pubs and the automatic assumption of guilt when some misdemeanour, especially involving local white girls, took place. The heroes of the book are those locals who defy the racist conventions and welcome the black soldiers to their homes and pubs. *Round the Bend* likewise displays Shute's respect for other cultures and customs as the main character develops an airline company in the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Shute was versatile. He explores regression under hypnosis, in *An Old Captivity*, spirituality in *Round the Bend* and *In the Wet*, and heartbreaking romance in *Landfall*, *Pastoral*, *Requiem for a Wren* and *The Rainbow and the Rose*. Whilst Shute professed no personal faith, matters of spirituality and the possibility of a life beyond death clearly intrigued him and

this is explored in most depth in *No Highway*, where the central character is a practicing spiritualist.

Aviation, sailing and engineering feature in most of Shute's works. In this he was following the writers' adage of writing about what you know. He was a trained pilot, an accomplished sailor and had an intense interest in engineering. Shute could explain the intricacies of an internal combustion engine, as in his final novel *Trustee from the Toolroom*, the thrill of flying early biplanes in *The Rainbow and The Rose* and the difficulties of navigating at sea in *Trustee from the Toolroom* without losing the attention of the reader. His books are as educational as they are intriguing and entertaining.

His novels *Beyond the Black Stump*, *The Far Country* and *In the Wet* describe an Australia which will be unfamiliar to most Australians living today, although the outback may well retain some of these features. To some extent, all his novels are adventures, but in *The Pied Piper* and *Most Secret*, both set in Nazi occupied Europe, Shute demonstrates his mastery of tension.

Prophecy and politics

Shute's most prophetic novel, *What Happened to the Corbetts*, explored the then unknown phenomenon of high-altitude aerial bombing. Written between the wars and drawing on his experience of aviation, engineering, ballistics and navigation the novel is set in Southampton. War has broken out again with Germany and, long before anyone had experienced such a thing, the Germans drop high explosive bombs on the city under cloud cover. They can be heard but not seen. The destruction of houses and death of civilians is immense. Shute describes this in scenes which must have been eerily prescient to those who suffered during The Blitz.

Nevil Shute became a wealthy man. He was handsomely paid off

when he left the aircraft company he established and, simultaneously, was paid generously for the film rights to some of his early novels. He pursued a career as an author and, as evidenced by his output and his reputation, was very successful. It is clear in *Slide Rule* that he felt a great sense of responsibility towards the hundreds of men he had employed in his company. Their needs were always paramount when it came to financial and business decisions. His men were often paid while he and his fellow directors took little and, sometimes, no salary.

Compassion for the plight of the unemployed is probably best displayed in his fourth novel *Ruined City*. The main character, a very wealthy businessman, assumes a false identity and sets out on a long walk from London to the North of England to escape the pressures of work. He comes across a town where the local shipping industry has collapsed, the government are doing little to help, and the social fabric of the town is deteriorating. He uses his own fortune to secure some shipping orders for the town, and the novel reflects on the positive and dignifying effect that having work and earning a wage bring to the people there.

You sense that Shute, then early in his own writing career, was frustrated by the declining state of post-war Britain during The Depression. You also sense his compassion and, without recourse to socialism and all that entails, for the people suffering as a result. He clearly fantasises about being able to do something about it.

Never a favourite of literary critics, he was very much a favourite of the common man. He wrote about decency, purpose, and perseverance. His characters do not seek celebrity or revolution, they seek to do what is right, often at great personal cost. His books sold millions, and he continues to be read.

Nevil Shute Norway died aged only 60 in 1960. Embarrassed by a

lifelong stammer, he refused to be interviewed or to give lectures. As a result, no recordings of his voice exist. However, his voice flows freely from the pages of his books.

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