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## In Search of Nevil Shute

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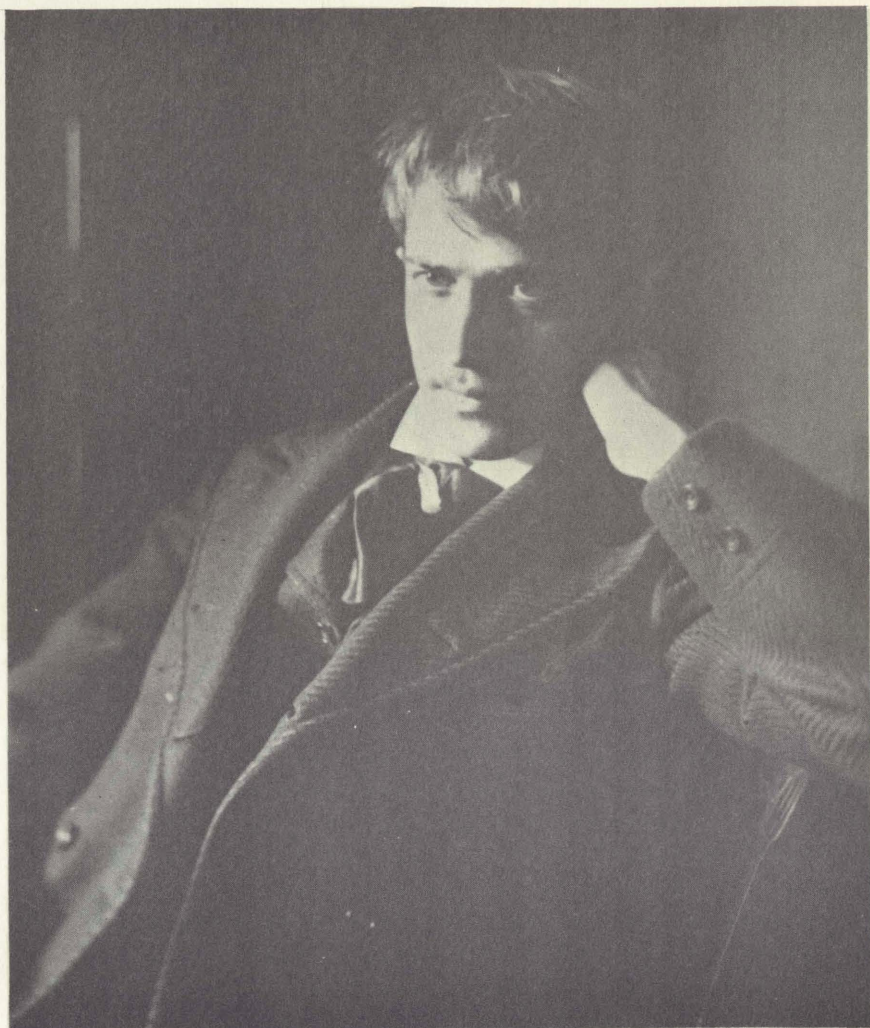
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Stephen Crane in 1893. Photograph by Corwin Knapp Linson, artist, friend of Crane, and author of *My Stephen Crane* (Syracuse University Press, 1958). From the Stephen Crane Papers, George Arents Research Library.

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## *TABLE OF CONTENTS*

	<b>Page</b>
The Modernity of Stephen Crane's Poetry: A Centennial Tribute	
Walter Sutton	3
In Search of Nevil Shute	
Julian Smith	8
Preliminary Calendar of the Nevil Shute Norway Manuscripts Microfilm	
Howard L. Applegate	14
Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, American Sculptor	21
The Management of a University Library	
Roger H. McDonough	36
Asa Eastwood and His Diaries, 1806–1870	
Faye Dudden	42
Open for Research . . . Notes on Collections	51
News of Library Associates	54

# *In Search of Nevil Shute*

by Julian Smith

Because it contains much unpublished autobiographical material and early or variant drafts of his published fiction, the Nevil Shute Norway manuscript collection on microfilm at Syracuse University offers an unusually fine chance to study in depth a popular writer who brought pleasure to millions of readers through a career spanning three decades.<sup>1</sup>

The essence of “Nevil Shute” is found most properly through his novels, not his life; therefore, the major emphasis here is on his fiction. But as his fiction grew out of his experiences and interests in a way not common among popular writers, a brief guide to his life is necessary for understanding his work.

Young Nevil is first seen through the eyes of his own mother, who described some of his adventures during the Irish troubles of 1916 in a series of letters published under her married name, “Mrs. Hamilton Norway”: *The Sinn Fein Rebellion As I Saw It* (London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1916). Shute described his own life up to 1938, when he turned from engineering to writing as a full time career, in *Slide Rule: The Autobiography of an Engineer* (1954), the manuscript of which contains a number of interesting deletions.

Shute’s life as an aeronautical engineer was devoted chiefly to an ill-fated airship venture between 1924 and 1930 and to founding and running a successful aircraft corporation from 1931 to 1938. After *Slide Rule*, a basic study of the first period is James Leasor’s *The Millionth Chance: The Story of the R 101* (New York: Reynal and Company, 1957); H. A. Taylor’s

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Dr. Smith is a professor of English at Ithaca College, Ithaca, New York, and author of a critical biography of Nevil Shute Norway, to be published by the Twayne English Authors Series in 1972. His bibliographic article traces, in roughly chronological order, his sources for the biography.

<sup>1</sup>In addition to the microfilm, the University Library has reproductions on paper of the Shute manuscripts.

*Airspeed Aircraft Since 1931* (London: Putnam, 1970) covers the second period. Neither book has much to say about Shute, but both are handy in documenting his professional surroundings.

Shute's experiences in the second world war are glimpsed briefly in Edward Terrell's *Admiralty Brief: The Story of Inventions That Contributed to Victory in the Battle of the Atlantic* (London: Harrap, 1958) and much more fully in Gerald Pawle's *The Secret War* (New York: W. Sloan Associates, 1957), for which Shute wrote a foreword in addition to giving Pawle a long memoir with the invitation to incorporate it into his book as he wished. But the best sources are the fifteen unpublished articles he wrote for the Ministry of Information in 1944 and 1945 dealing with his travels in England in the spring before the Normandy Invasion and in Burma as the war in Europe ended. The most interesting of these articles is the twelve thousand word account of his "Journey In To Normandy" with the invasion fleet.

In 1948-1949 Shute flew to Australia and back in his own plane, a trip described in his unpublished flight log and in the book written by his companion on the trip, James Riddell (*Flight of Fancy* [New York: Duell, Sloane and Pearce, 1951], with an introduction by Shute).

Shortly before he died, Shute sent the Prime Minister of Australia a long *Memorandum about Creative Writers, Artists, and Composers in Australia*. This unpublished document contains the fullest statement of Shute's literary and artistic credo as well as a summary of his financial rewards as a writer. Also of interest to the student of the popular novelist's craft are a series of notes for lectures and speeches supplied to me by Mrs. Heather Norway Mayfield, Shute's older daughter; copies of these I have passed on to Syracuse University for inclusion in its Shute collection.

Eventually the letters I have received from Shute's friends and colleagues and copies of Shute's letters now in my possession will be deposited at Syracuse as well. The richest source of letters are the files of William Heinemann Ltd., Shute's English publishers. Included in these are many letters containing lengthy quotations from Shute's correspondence with his agents, A. P. Watt & Son; unfortunately, the agents did not preserve their Shute letters, and the Heinemann files date back only to the mid-1940's. William Morrow and Company, Shute's American publishers, have very few Shute letters in their files, but they do have a comprehensive collection of review and interview clippings and a massive amount of intra-office correspondence detailing the mechanics of promoting and merchandizing a best-selling author.

Nevil Shute is mentioned more frequently in histories of British aviation than by literary historians. Criticism of his fiction is limited almost entirely to reviews, the best of which appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, and in the *Saturday Review*, which put him on the cover of three issues. In general, his reception by reviewers was more enthusiastic in America than in his native

England. There is only one important article on Shute, David Martin's "The Mind that Conceived *On the Beach*," *Meanjin*, 19 (June 1960), 193-200. William Buchan's general introduction to the Heron edition of his work is a helpful survey of Shute's career. A compendium of helpful or significant reviews, articles, and interviews can be drawn from the notes and references at the end of my book on Shute.

Though Nevil Shute Norway often claimed that he wrote nothing but novels, he did write a number of unpublished short stories that are by and large out of the mainstream of his important fiction: "Knightly Vigil," "Tudor Windows," "Piuro," "Before the Mail," and "In the Uttermost Parts of the Sea." In addition, he published and quickly forgot one long short story or novella: "Air Circus," *Blackwood's Magazine*, October 1937, pp. 433-72. Also published in *Blackwood's* was the factual "The Airship Venture," May 1933, pp. 599-627, later incorporated into *Slide Rule*. Under his real name, Norway, he published two speculative pieces: "Heavier-than-air Craft" in Sir Charles Dennistoun Burney's *The World, the Air and the Future* (London: Knopf, 1929), pp. 259-90, and a pamphlet on *The Future Population of*



Nevil Shute Norway as a student at Balliol College, Oxford.  
Courtesy of Heather Norway Mayfield.

*Australia* prepared for the Australian Citizenship Convention (Canberra, 1959).

His published fiction consists of twenty-three novels and one filmscript. They are listed here in order of composition, with their sources suggested and indications, where possible, of the significance of the manuscript collection at Syracuse University to an understanding of the finished works. Unless otherwise noted, the books were first published by Morrow in this country and by Heinemann in England; all of the novels are presently available from Heinemann in hardcover, and most are available in this country in paperback.

*Stephen Morris* and *Pilotage*. These two apprentice novels were written in 1923 and 1924 respectively and were shelved after being rejected by many publishers. After Shute's death, they were heavily edited by the elimination of many philosophical passages and published jointly under the title *Stephen Morris* in 1961. Thus the manuscripts, not the published versions, show Shute's true intention.

*Marazan* (London: Cassell, 1926). No extant manuscript.

*So Disdained* (Cassell, 1928). Also published in America as *The Mysterious Aviator* (Boston: Houghton, 1928). No extant manuscript.

*Lonely Road* (Cassell, 1932). No extant manuscript.

*Ruined City* (1938). Published in America as *Kindling*. The first Shute novel not to share common characters and plot lines with the five earlier books, it is his first really mature novel and the first of the books published during his life for which we have a manuscript. Hereafter, there is at least one complete manuscript draft available for each novel.

*What Happened to the Corbetts* (1939). American title: *Ordeal*. The Heinemann Uniform Edition contains Shute's own explanation of how this novel came to be written.

*An Old Captivity* (1940). The manuscript first draft contains an introductory letter by the narrator, later deleted, which explains that the story has been assembled as a psychiatric case study. In "The Young Captives," *Wings: The Literary Guild Magazine*, March 1940, pp. 5-8, Shute acknowledges his large debt to Fridtjof Nansen's *In Northern Mists* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1911) as both inspiration and source material for the Viking episodes.

*Landfall* (1940). An interesting feature of the manuscript is that the author's footnote that appears at the bottom of page 135 on the Morrow edition is included as part of the main narrative in the manuscript—that is, almost as though Shute had been speaking directly in his own voice as narrator. The chief character in this novel and other characters also appear in *The Lamé Ducks Fly*, the first chapter of an abandoned novel.

*Pied Piper* (1942). This is the first manuscript accompanied by elaborate working notes. All later manuscripts are preceded by such notes, generally in pencil on small scraps of paper.



*Pastoral* (1944). Shute's attempt to adapt this novel as a film (see series I, item 8 in Dr. Applegate's inventory, following) throws light back on the novel.

*Most Secret* (1945). Completed in August 1942, this novel was withheld from publication by admiralty censors. Pawle's *The Secret War*, cited above, documents military, administrative, and technical problems similar to those in the novel, thus suggesting the novel has some basis in fact and that the narrator is a thinly disguised self portrait.

*Vinland the Good* (1946). An adaptation for film and expansion of the Viking episodes in *An Old Captivity*. This script, that for *Pastoral*, and his adaptation of a J. M. Barrie story (see series III, item 1) indicate Shute was trying to learn filmwriting right after the war.

*The Chequer Board* (1947). The background for this novel is to be found chiefly in the Burmese articles in the Ministry of Information series and to a lesser extent in Walter White's account of race relations in the armed forces, *A Rising Wind* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1945). See also Shute on "What Went into *The Chequer Board*," *Wings: The Literary Guild Review*, April 1947, pp. 6-7.

*No Highway* (1948). Shute's 1929 article on "Heavier-than-air Craft" in Burney's *The World, The Air and the Future*, Burney's book itself, and Shute's early civil aviation fiction and experience all provide general background for this novel. The most specific technical influence on the novel was the metal fatigue research of Sir Alfred Pugsley in the early and mid 1940's.

*A Town Like Alice* (1950). Published in America as *The Legacy*. The genesis of this novel can be seen very easily in the flight log of Shute's trip to Australia, which may explain why he was able to write the novel in only three and a half months.

*Round the Bend* (1951). Shute's own favorite among his novels, this mystical story invites comparison with Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* (1944), a copy of which Shute owned but which he probably did not read until after he wrote *Round the Bend*. Immediate sources for the novel are to be found in the flight log and to a lesser extent in the Burmese articles.

*The Far Country* (1952).

*In the Wet* (1953). Traces of Shute's political and social thinking concerning the future of Australia and the Commonwealth are to be found in the collection of speech and lecture notes referred to above and in Shute's pamphlet on *The Future Population of Australia*. The dating on the manuscript indicates Shute began the novel well before the death of King George in February 1952 and that it was not written, as some have charged, to take advantage of the interest in Elizabeth II's coronation.

*Requiem for a Wren* (1955). American title: *The Breaking Wave*. The manuscript collection contains enough sources for a major study of how a novel grows in a prolific writer's mind over the period of a decade. Incidents



in several of the pre-Normandy Ministry of Information articles led to the abortive novel, *Blind Understanding* (series I, item 7), which was itself an attempt to capitalize on abandoned themes and relationships of the unpublished novella *The Seafarers* (series I, item 6).

*Beyond the Black Stump* (1956). Correspondence accompanying the manuscript details some of the Australian background for this novel. Some of the American background has been supplied to me by Mrs. C. L. Gilstrap, whose letters will eventually be deposited at Syracuse. Though *Beyond the Black Stump* is by most standards a very minor production, it seems worth considering as a “spin-off” of interests that would result in *On the Beach*.

*On The Beach* (1957). Shute’s most famous and influential novel; the extensive manuscript notes are particularly worthy of study.

*The Rainbow and the Rose* (1960). The adulterous relationship at the heart of this novel is obviously based upon the affair alluded to on page 68 of the American edition of *Slide Rule*. The central character takes his name from a children’s book written by Shute’s grandmother, Georgina Norway (*Adventures of Johnnie Pascoe* [London: J. Nisbet & Co., 1889]).

*Trustee from the Toolroom* (1961). The starting point for this sea adventure is probably the experience of Shute’s friend Miles Smeeton, whose *Once Is Enough* (New York: Norton, 1959) contains a foreword by Shute and a letter from him speculating on “what might happen to a yacht overtaken by an exceptional sea while running.”

