

Nevil Shute biography

Carol Fox

Sources: Slide Rule--The Autobiography of an Engineer; Australian Dictionary of Biography; New World encyclopedia

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Nevil Shute Norway (1899-1960) was both a popular novelist and a successful aeronautical engineer. He used Nevil Shute as his pen name, and his full name in his engineering career, in order to protect his engineering career. He suspected that his employers might consider a man who wrote novels on the side “not a serious person”; he thought Nevil Shute “quite a good, euphonious name for a novelist; and he therefore decided that “Mr. Norway could go on untroubled by his other interest and build up a sound reputation as an engineer.” [Slide Rule, p.63]

Since Mr. Norway’s father and grandfather had both published books, and his older brother was a successful student, it seems likely that writing as a pastime might have come naturally to him. But his

academic career got off to a rocky start. Born in a London suburb, he started school there, but

at his first preparatory school, the facts that he suffered from a bad stammer and that most of his teachers were unsympathetic kept him mostly miserable. At around age eleven, he revolted by cutting school for about ten days. First, he spent a day (and then another day) riding the train to school and back instead of getting off the train and attending classes; then he discovered he could instead take the train to a nearby science museum, where he found “a wonderland of mechanical models in glass cases in amongst examples of the real thing...above all, aeroplanes.”

For that brief spell, then, he had delightful days, although the evenings (lying to his parents about why he had no homework) “became the purgatory that school had been” until the head master finally wrote his parents a letter inquiring about his absence.

Fortunately, when his parents learned the facts, rather than making him return to the same school they sent him to live with friends in Oxford where he could go as

a day boy to the Dragon School, which turned out to be a much more congenial environment.

So began Nevil's fascination with machines (especially airplanes), and his association with Oxford which, his 1954 autobiography notes, "has been, perhaps, one of the happiest and most formative influences of my life."

[Slide Rule, p. 14]

Nevil's schooling continued along those lines through prep school at the Dragon, with writing as an early hobby. until war intervened. His autobiography mentions that he had begun "writing poetry in the last year I spent at school, all of it very bad." [Slide Rule, p. 25]

His brother Fred, two years older than Nevil, went into combat in France and in 1915 died of gangrene following shell injuries sustained there. Nevil's father urged him to take training and exams in hope of getting a commission in the Royal Engineers or Artillery; the exams for such positions were competitive, and Nevil did not succeed in getting a commission because his stammer resulted in his failing exams and being "chucked out" at some points. He did

ultimately serve for a period during WWI in the Reserve Battalion, where one segment of his service comprised membership in “ a permanent funeral party” assigned to travel around Kent providing military funerals for soldiers who died of the flu epidemic that was then ravaging England. As Nevil’s employment status was still that of a student, and students were among the first being demobilized, shortly after the Armistice he got leave from the funeral unit to interview for admission to Balliol College, Oxford. He was admitted after a half-hour interview, and then began his study of Engineering, which continued until he “went down” from Oxford in 1922 with a BA degree.

His autobiography (about his life up to 1938)

O contains a somber assessment of his frame of mind at that time:

“For four years of my adolescence, I had lived in a world growing steadily bleaker and grimmer, and in that four years I had grown to accept the fact that in a very short time I should probably be dead.” [Slide Rule p. 34]

During his Oxford years, Mr. Norway had some unpaid and some paid work in engineering, aeronautical and otherwise, and began learning to fly, while continuing to write “probably two or three evenings a week” as a relaxation. He wrote what he later called “bad poetry,” gradually moving into short stories and novels.

Sometime in 1923 he finished his first novel, which he put “on the shelf, where it will remain because it is a very poor book.” [Slide Rule, p.53]

During this phase of his life, Norway made his living at responsible and remunerative engineering jobs. He was an aircraft designer and pilot in the pioneer days of private flying, and was later to write that “most of [his] adult life, perhaps all the worthwhile part of it, has been spent in messing about with aeroplanes.”

Shute completed his third (and first-published) novel , Marazan, in 1926. Thereafter, he continued to write as a relaxation from the stresses of his various engineering jobs; he remarks in his autobiography that he always liked doing two jobs at once, feeling that to focus on writing in the evening helped him face mechanical work more refreshed in the morning.

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Beginning around 1924 Mr. Norway's engineering work became more intense, such that although he kept writing for relaxation, there was an hiatus in his publishing from 1932 to 1938. His autobiography, Slide Rule: The Autobiography of an Engineer, which was published in 1954 and gives an account of his life up to 1938, includes an extensive account of one particularly stressful episode of the competitive development [competition between private industry and government teams) of two airships, one of which crashed disastrously on its maiden flight.

That account, according to the Australian Dictionary of Biography,"revealed [Shute's] narrative gifts and some of his major preoccupations as a writer—the hubris of governments, bureaucratic paralysis, and the betrayal

of individual common sense by large organizations.” In 1931, Norway established his own aircraft construction company

, which became quite successful ,but by the end of his return to military work in the 1940s he retired from that company and the commercial success of his writing had become sufficient to free him from other employment.

In 1948, Norway flew his own plane to Australia. Upon returning to England he felt oppressed by British taxation and decided that he and his family would emigrate.They lived in Australia for the rest of his life; his greatest writing successes dated from this time, and most of them had Australian settings.

During World War II, Norway served as an engineer in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and in the Admiralty’s Miscellaneous Weapon Development Department. After WWII, having retired from his engineering business’ he achieved even more commercial success with his writing. Later publications include Round the Bend (1951), The Far Country (1952), In the Wet (1953), Slide Rule (1954), Requiem for a Wren (1955) Beyond the Black Stump(1956) On the

Beach (1957) *The Rainbow* and *the Rose* (1958) *Trustee From the Toolroom* (1960) and *Stephen Morris* (1961). The last two were published posthumously. Several of his novels were made into films, the most notable being *A Town Like Alice* and *On the Beach*.

Norway had few literary pretensions. He believed that the subject matter for novels came from direct observation of ordinary people in their own settings. An unambiguous morality of strong heroes and loyal heroines, combined with exciting and well-told narratives with simple characterization were the basis of his success. His prose style was plain. If his novels seem ponderous to today's taste, they convey very well the last British imperialist vision of the Dominions, Australia in particular, as societies where English virtues might thrive, away from the decadence of postwar Britain. Norway died in Australia in 1960, survived by his wife and two daughters.