

Nevil Shute: The Heart Is a Condition

NEVIL SHUTE NORWAY sounds like the pen-name for a poet, but the real man to whom it belonged had a domesticated imagination which came home running when the lights went on at night. Although his annual royalties, as he approached 61, reached \$175,000, he was more interested in flying; and had not the facts of our present, perhaps futureless generation not been startling, perhaps he might not have been either. As it is, *On the Beach*, his second-from-last novel, depicts the quiet cosmic end of man from radiation, between the wet kisses of Hollywood stars.

Like Somerset Maugham, an older British hack, Nevil as a boy suffered an agonizing stammer, partly compensated for by vacations on the Continent and subsequent tales of local color shared with his father, a postal official. His childhood companions were the pioneering planes of Bleriot and the Wright brothers, encased in the London Science Museum. After an engineering course at Oxford, he became a junior designer for de Havilland whose bombers had just helped win World War I. In 1923, he soloed; and decided that some day he would found his own manufacturing firm. That dream came true, in the form of Airspeed Ltd.

Changing his last name so that his employers would not think him frivolous, in his offtime he wrote novels. In 1930

he flew to Canada in his own design, the R.100; and blamed bureaucratic bungling for the crash of its sister airship, R101, some weeks later. He himself has never crashed. But he did find himself temporarily without a job until he organized Airspeed Ltd. By 1938, when he resigned, its annual orders exceeded three million dollars; and the old garage in which he had started had become a huge plant. That same year he published his fourth novel.

EVERY YEAR THEREAFTER a novel came off his typewriter, on the old secondhand rolltop desk. The style of writing was as plain and simple as the man, although the subjects should have been more inspiring; racial prejudice, in *The Chequer Board*; war's refugee children, in *Pied Piper*; and now nuclear suicide, in *On the Beach*. Sometimes he seemed to have clairvoyance, writing about the bombing of England in mid-1939, and the explosion of aircraft from metal fatigue long before the British Comets actually began to crash. But the public repaid him with sales not for his intelligence but for the fun in *A Town Like Alice*, *In the Wet*, *Round the Bend*, *Requiem for a Wren*, and *The Far Country*.

In World War II, Shute worked on secret weapons; but later the heavy British taxes convinced him to move to Australia. His heart no longer let him fly, so he settled down to a pig and dairy way of life at countrified Langwarrin, Victoria in 1950. He refused to attend the Australian premiere of *On the Beach*, on the grounds that the movie was insufficiently like his book; but it is not clear if he thought the movie too subtle or too distorted to be true to his work. In any case his heart did not wait to see the outcome of world fallout, but rushed him thirty miles north to Melbourne where he died in a hospital bed, in 1960. His heart had not spent its strength on any great causes, but like the great ships falling through space from metal fatigue, it had simply worn itself thin in the attrition of existence.