



**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**

BAM
CONFERENCE

3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER

ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

About BAM

The British Academy of Management (BAM) is the leading authority on the academic field of management in the UK, supporting and representing the community of scholars and engaging with international peers.

<http://www.bam.ac.uk/>

ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the ongoing debate in historiography about the value of contemporary fiction as an additional or alternative source of historical authenticity and relates to the work of Nevil Shute Norway, who was a best-selling novelist of the 1930s to 1960s under the nom de plume of Nevil Shute. In his main career he was a pioneering aircraft designer and airship engineer, taking over as Chief Design Engineer from the great Barnes Wallis on the R100 a successful Airship that flew safely from the UK to Canada and back. In his time he was the youngest fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society, entrepreneur and founder of his own highly successful aircraft manufacturing company founded in the city of York. As Engineer, CEO and novelist, Nevil Shute was a triple success: as a member of the “Secret War” a loose collection of military inventors, engineers and technologists he worked on secret weapons throughout World War 2. He was a senior manager and he wrote of managers in his novels and he outlined a theory of industrial management in his memoirs. His fiction-writing persona bases his craft on the virtues of accuracy, contemporary recording and firm comprehension of technological, scientific and engineering realities and methodological principles. His career breaks the mould of the banal stereotypes that inhabit our textbooks. In particular, his career and contribution illuminate the development of management practice in the United Kingdom between the 1920s and 1950s. He never heard of the current quack term “Corporate Social Responsibility” but his writings both fictional and practical were imbued with its fabric. Management “history” comprises works of both non-fiction and fiction as its raw material and Nevil Shute Norway’s oeuvre straddles both genres. In this paper we discuss how a best selling novel illuminates the history of his era.

1

“Authentic” History as Art or Science

Gregory and Walford comment that “Maps of the intellectual landscape are always awkward affairs. The boundaries between different subjects are not entirely contingent — reasons can always be found for the fences to run this way rather than that — but neither do they seem to correspond to any clearly defined, ‘natural’ “divisions” (Gregory and Walford, 1989, p1). So it is in scholarly writing with what we proudly designate as “history” and what we sometimes dismissively denigrate as “fiction”.

A long-standing debate in historiography concerning the state of the subject as an “art” or as a “science” seemed to have been settled by the determination that the scientific status of the discipline rests on its foundation in records, documents, official data, statistics and physical traces of past experiences (Robinson, J.H. 1930; Taylor, 1938) . The uncertainty of this preference for records over other types of evidence can be sensed by anyone who has had responsibility for creating such especially fictional artefacts as “minutes of board meetings”, where material data can be subsumed under hierarchical determination of what is to count “for the record” as authentically Holy Writ.

Nonetheless the debate has rumbled on for a century or even longer if one chooses to go back to Aristotle. It is re-opened in our times by the turn to the centrality of “text” in sociological as well as literary analysis, and geography (Eagleton, 2011; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000, Barnes and Duncan,) Sometimes it is claimed that in our generation there exists a widespread “'crisis of representation' in the human sciences” (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Nonetheless, 'our texts are not mirrors which we hold up to the world, reflecting its shapes and structures immediately and without distortion. They are, instead, creatures of our own making, though their making is not entirely of our own choosing.' (Gregory and Walford ,1989: 2)

Documents of record are texts, constructed in a context and for purposes of social action. So are works of certain genres of fiction. Some of these have status as contemporary records. Ricoeur (1971) contributes helpfully to this debate noting that “text” is central and proposing “a model of the text” that also permits the possibility of a text “escaping” its intentional frame in Barthes’ (1977, 1984) phrasing and becoming available for future deconstructive analysis. This is the hint that we shall follow in this paper without following Barthes all the way into the deconstruction of text as mythology (Barthes, 1957) .

De Certeau advises that “fiction is the repressed other of historical discourse” and this terse bipolarity may be a good starting point for reconsidering the relation of these genres. (De Certeau, 1992; White, H. 2005) Aristotle regarded history and poetry as both essential elements of a complete comprehension. In a post-modern style where evident facts to some are ideological constructs to others, perhaps it is necessary to distrust the “truths” implicit in attempts to gauge historical “reality”. But if it is

necessary for us to rate history as less plausible is it now equally important to consider the claims of fiction more generously? Blauvelt (2003) notes that de Certeau (1984) distinguishes “strategies” as the creation by power-holders of an “official” truth that can be embodied in structures of dominance from “tactics” that are the response of the subjugated against the oppression of hegemony.

The matters depicted in Nevil Shute’s novel “Ruined City” fits this bipolarity rather well; in using *tactics* against *strategy* the protagonist (not necessarily a “hero” but less certainly not a “villain” either) , Henry Warren, has to pay a personal cost for his decisions in his prison time. Nonetheless in considering the gain in the battle of oppressive capital versus unemployed but also *unarmed* and *unprepared* workers the roles can be at least temporarily reversed. From a student’s perspective for every dreary evening spent mugging up the doleful “reality” of historical dates, Kings, Queens and Presidents, the St Bartholemew’s massacre, the Corn Laws and the Covenanters, relayed to our times only as context-stripped documents, there are the fictions of Dumas, Walter Scott...and Shute to get the senses and the cognitive analysis at least started. Helen Cam, a leading medieval historian of the post Second World War era, was alive to the value of fiction in arousing “the critical faculty and stimulating investigation” and noted that “the historical novelist has resources...from which the scientific historian is debarred” (Cam, 1961, p 19)

Czarniawska has reminded us in “Narrating the Organization”, “ The attraction of a narrative approach is that it pays attention to the forms in which knowledge is cast and the effects that these have on an audience ,scientific or otherwise” (Czarniawska, 1997) .

Nevil Shute Norway was born in 1899 in West London and died in 1962 in the Australian state of Victoria. He was well known as a writer of best-selling novels the world over and was and remains especially popular in the United States, but he was also, and firstly, a qualified and highly respected aeronautical engineer, a leading figure in the, its time, new and dynamic technology of airship construction, he was a successful entrepreneur, who with a colleague, Hessel Tiltman, started his own business, Airspeed, which he subsequently sold successfully. Airspeed built a successful aeroplane type used by the RAF for many years as the training vehicle on which were trained the pilots and crews who won the bomber war against Germany.

While working on the airship project at Howden and then at the Airspeed factory in the old bus garage in Piccadilly he lived at the St Leonards Club in York. He was also irretrievably and fundamentally “English” but of a rather special kind as a member of the technically-qualified provincial middle-class. No 5 St Leonards Place was the St Leonards Club was “a social centre for professional men,” (St Leonards, 2016)

Nevil Shute Norway’s father was Arthur Hamilton Norway, a senior civil servant who became Head of the Irish Post Office and whose office in the Dublin GPO became the epicentre of the Easter Rising in 1916. A.H. Norway was also a writer and his *Highways and Byways of Yorkshire* can still be found in second hand book shops. (Norway, A.H. 1899) After schooling at Shrewsbury School, Nevil developed an interest in aviation while he was an undergraduate at Oxford University and on graduating from Balliol College with a third class degree he blagged a position in the developing aviation industry, working for Geoffrey de Havilland.

Throughout the 1920s he worked as a stress calculator for the De Havilland company. This work involved the hand calculation of many complex mathematical formulae relating to the stresses experienced in the airframes of the air ships which he was involved in constructing.

For several years he lived the life of a single man and in many of the evenings as a relaxation from his laborious daily grind of calculation he wrote novels. Initially, they were of a fairly conventional genre of adventure stories of the John Buchan and Sapper type (Shute, 1926, 1928). Graham Greene commenced his writing career in a similar way. These stories contain heroes, villains, spies, traitors and patriots. With his third published book, *Lonely Road* he became a serious writer and the book was made into a film: the book is still in print as most of Shute’s novels are and still packs a punch in its innovative structure its sensitive character delineation and strong plot (Shute, 1932) as well as its insight into the contemporary class structure.

His career in the airship industry reached its apogee with his position as the second in command of the R100 airship design team to the great Barnes Wallis, subsequently to become famous as the inventor of the bouncing bomb with which the RAF destroyed

the Mohne Dam. He was an exponent of the theory of geodesic structures which he applied to his airship designs. The airship industry was regarded at that time as at least equal in commercial and military potential to the heavier than air technologies of the monoplane and biplane.

The R100 team finished their work. Their craft sailed successfully with some minor adventures, but in the main safely, to Canada and returned. The experience of the R101 was not so fortunate. On her maiden flight to India carrying the newly appointed Viceroy of India (and former Secretary of State for Aviation) ,Lord Thompson who had been the initiator of the competing airships programme and a supporter of the state-built craft, the R101 crashed in flames in Beauvais in Northern France. Almost all aboard her perished including many of Nevil Shute's closest friends and associates. It was an experience that seared his soul and it was an event which terminated the English airship industry. Within days the British government decided to cancel the airship project and the R100 which had flown successfully and met its specification was destroyed, its frame bulldozed and its metal sold to the German Zeppelin programme. Nevil Shute never forgot these lessons.

Nevil Shute felt some personal responsibility and knew that the livelihoods of any men and women were to some extent in his hands so , he raised funds for and became managing director of a company, Airspeed, that produced the highly successful Airspeed Oxford bomber aeroplane, of which nearly nine thousand were constructed and in which were trained the RAF bomber crews who won the air war against Nazi Germany. Airspeed built its aircraft initially in premises in York and subsequently at Portsmouth. This company was bought out at the end of the 1930s and the proceeds of this sale as well as the success that Nevil Shute had by then attained from the sale of his novels encouraged him to become a full time writer. The sale that made the difference to his life was that of the Hollywood movie rights of Ruined City for \$35,000.

During the Second World War he was anxious to serve King and Country. He was ordered to become a member of a top secret team in the Ministry of Defence devising new, unusual (and it has to be said, to a certain extent, un-successful) weapons of war.

After the war, he continued his career as a successful novelist. But in 1950, disappointed at the return of the Labour Government which in his view had done much to diminish enterprise and the possibilities of economic success in Britain, he emigrated to Australia where he saw more hopeful prospects for a personal lifestyle and for the continuance of the values which he believed to be characteristic of the English approach to life and society. Here he continued his successful writing career producing such best sellers as *A Town Like Alice*, *The Far Country* and *In the Wet* (Shute, . Here he also wrote *On The Beach*.

2

Narrative and ethnographic approaches are central to understanding the complexities of how social organization in historical societies is continuously co-created. Nevil Shute, a master of narrative, tapped a deep vein of consciousness in the English speaking world .He was for a generation the voice of their experience and he displayed his works with a good conversation.

I here refer to only one of his books which characterised that period before the Second World War when Shute's reputation was made and his style was fashioned. The book is *Ruined City*.

Ruined City was written in the late nineteen thirties after a five year fallow period after "*Lonely Road* " had been made in to a film and Shute had become successful as a businessman. Shute had raised capital, but not in the City, preferring personal investments from individuals, in particular well to do farmers in East Yorkshire. He was the CEO and Chief Designer of the *Airspeed Company* that he had set up in a former bus garage in York (The building until recently still existed, though in poor condition). His company moved (in fact "did a runner" to avoid the bailiffs, with strong people riding shotgun!) to a factory at Portsmouth Municipal Airfield where it provided employment to many and built a successful product, the *Airspeed Oxford*, that became in a subsequent evolution a main training aeroplane for the RAF. Over 8,690 of this aircraft were constructed. In it were trained the bomber pilots who, under Bomber Harris of Bomber Command, won the air war for Britain. The manufacturing virtues of the *Airspeed company* led it to be specified as a venue for building the *De Havilland Mosquito* fighter-bomber aircraft also.

But the firm was always existing in the under margin of the economy, as indeed was most of the aviation industry. And it was only the rearmament of the late thirties in the face of the almost certain inception of the next war that saved the company. Once again Shute in real life came face to face with the reality of the state and its involvement in the economy. This meant bureaucracy and with it the joy went out of Shute's life and work as an entrepreneur.

In his autobiographical memoir *Slide Rule* he explains that there are some people who are "starters" and others who are "runners". He saw himself always as a starter not as a runner (Shute, 1954). Airspeed aeroplanes were used by both sides in the Spanish Civil War. Clearly a major European war was impending. But war work in the aeroplane industry as it was at that time for Shute meant becoming an apparatchik and that to him was anathema. He found that in his life as businessman he was often at odds with others on the board of direction of his own company. So, once again, he relieved the pressures of that side of his life by taking up the challenge of writing another novel.

The hero of *Ruined City* is Henry Warren, a successful City of London financier whose wife is having an affair that is becoming increasingly public until Warren decides to bring matters to a head and confront his wife with his knowledge of her infidelity.

Warren contemplates the reality of his position: his wife has personal means and can survive a divorce but he has no desire to enter her life "To hold her he would have to live a great deal of her life, an idle life to be spent with idle people, following the fashion. It would be possible for him to do so; he had money in plenty to give up his work and retire. But he was only forty-three years old; his work was dear to him....." (Shute, 1938, p22). So he offers her a compromise: they would leave the city and sell the West End house: and go to live in the country away from the city's diversions and temptations. But she refuses and challenges him to divorce her, announcing that she is going to stay with her friends in Cannes...

"He stood and stared out of the window at the leaden roofs beneath a leaden sky, the running traffic in the street below. "As you like" he said at last "I'm sorry that we had to come to this." (Shute, 1938 p 24)

To get away from the situation he gets in to his big car and instructs his driver to drive north. In the wilds of the northern hills, he dismisses his chauffeur who sets out to return to London and in a melodramatic twist of the plot is killed on the way home. Thus no one knows of Warren's whereabouts. He collapses due to the unexpected rigours of his moorland tramping and is taken to a hospital in a northern town which has been hit by mass unemployment by reason of the closure of the one employer, a family owned shipyard. The northern town could be based on Hartlepool or maybe Jarrow .

In the hospital where men seem to be dying from exhaustion, malnutrition and the cumulative effect of years of immiseration, Warren learns at first hand the impact of financial decisions on the life chances of ordinary men and women. In hospital he remains anonymous and is befriended by the almoner who is a young woman who explains to him the reason for the high death rate on the ward in which Warren is recovering .

Poverty and poor diet has made the men simply too enfeebled to resist sickness and injury. As a result, their bodily defences have been eaten away by the experiences of unemployment.

Warren's sympathies are engaged and he comes to understand that there is another side to life. Through financial manipulation, which keeps only just inside conventional legal and ethical parameters, he raises funding for the shipyard. He saves jobs, recreates work and regenerates an enterprise which has some chance of becoming successful. But in so doing he has falsified a prospectus and raised money effectively on false pretences. This financial crime is discovered. He is prosecuted and sent to prison. (These events are based on Norway's own experiences in raising capital for Airspeed in which he only just kept on the right side of the law).

On his release he returns to the town to seek out the woman through whom he has become aware of the realities of unemployment and its effect on the life chances of individuals, and whom he now wishes to marry. He finds a blue plaque has been placed on the wall of the shipyard. It read :

“Henry Warren, 1934, he gave us work”.

While official, conventional society had rejected Henry Warren as a “dubious financier”, the ordinary people of the shipyard whose jobs and livelihoods he had re-inspired saw him as a hero. Henry Warren had applied his technical skills to remedy a social problem in an appropriate way.

This book was Shute’s first really big commercial success. *Lonely Road* had made him an interesting writer; *Ruined City* (which was called in the United States, *Kindling*) made him a best seller. Subsequently he gave up his career as a businessman and from then on saw himself centrally as a professional writer.

Some of the same themes that had engaged him in his first successful novel, *Lonely Road* are again characteristic of *Ruined City*. In the later novel the finance capital associated with the City of London is subtly dealt with and not always unfavourably contrasted with the apparently solid provincial values of the northern ship building town. In many of his writings he argues the need for capitalists to be close to the locations and regions and ways of life in which their investments are used. In *Ruined City* he is scathing of the selfishness of the original owners of the shipyard, a well-to-do family of local capitalists, who had taken excessive profits out of the company in times of plenty to finance an extravagant lifestyle involving luxurious second homes in France and left the company and the town that depended on it to rot when the depression set in.

As he recovers in the old Poor Law hospital he decides to stay a while longer in this depressed Northern town: he offers to pay his way by doing the books for the hospital: one day as he feels stronger he walks into the glum, grim dying town.

“The town was dreary with the sad Northern uniformity of long rows of grey houses on a minor scale. Dreary, he thought, but not as bad as some. The houses were better and larger than those which he remembered on his visits to other similar places on the north east coast. Gateshead, Jarrow, and Sunderland.; he judged the town to have been built more recently than those.

It seemed to be a place of about forty thousand inhabitants; later he found that this guess of his was very nearly right. It stood on the edge of the river Haws, a mile or so up from the sea ; behind the town the hill rose gently to the north, crowned with sparse fields and the gaunt slag heaps of an idle mine.

He found the one main street, Palmer Street, near the hospital. Like all the streets in the town this one was laid out in granite setts; there were rusted tram tracks down the middle of the street but no trams ran. The shops were mostly small and unpretentious; a great many of them were unoccupied, with windows boarded up. He passed by two closed banks. On a fine corner site, an expensive store was shuttered and deserted. On the facade above the windows he traced the outline letters of the sign that had been taken down, and he realized that he was standing in a town that could no longer support Woolworths. “ (Shute, 1938 p 65)

Shute’s critique of the “ruined city” of Sharples comes close to Lefebvre in its embodiment of class-based inequality in urban space , a place where “ capitalism penetrates the details of everyday life, and ... everyday life is thus relentlessly controlled (Lefebvre, 1991a).

At the heart of the book is a love story. Shute’s hero forms a liaison “beneath him” recognising the decency and stability in the character of the young woman almoner as a contrast to the feckless and selfish antics of his unfaithful wife.

But his hero Henry Warren is not a plaster saint. He does wrong in committing to paper an over-positive estimate of future earnings in his optimistic corporate brochure for the revitalised shipbuilding company for which he seeks City finance and he knows it. He does it in order that the greater good of the greater number may follow. He is prepared to take his punishment and serve his time in prison, even though he finds even this experience brings its own rewards. He is “accountable” and this accountability is central to Shute’s conception of the moral life: it is no special thing reserved for a superior class of people in society but it is central to the ordinary life of ordinary managers.

Ironically, the instrument of his being unmasked as one who has broken the financial code is a clergymen, a cynical, pompous and priggish character who is greedy for himself and unconscious of the message of his professed faith and its implications for the ordinary skilled English working people. This character, unusually for Shute, is unsympathetically drawn: one suspects it had a real-life original. Shute’s own drafting of a share-seeking brochure for his own company of Airspeed had attracted the serious interest of the Fraud Squad.

“Ruined City” is no socialist tract and there is no trite political agenda. There are, of course, echoes in Shute’s own account and in what we know of the financing of his companies which permits us to speculate that, at the very least, he knew what it would be like to move over that imperceptible line which divides the ethical from the unethical in business matters. When he was raising capital for Airspeed, the Fraud Squad had taken a keen interest in his activities.

Warren’s redemption comes about not through involvement in action but through withdrawal from it, for he writes about his time of imprisonment that it offered “a life of pure contemplation in conditions that are comfortable and ascetic. His position was entirely comparable to that of a novice in a monastery ... Warren found in prison a great part of the peace that a more devout man might find within a monastery.” (Shute, 1938, p210)

So neither involvement nor dissociation is portrayed by Shute as good in or for itself. It is the justification of the choice and its relation to the essential balance, which the protagonist can find within his own soul, because it mirrors the virtues of good craft work. Henry Warren is an efficient man of the City and abides by its rules because he understands them and the virtues that are embodied in good performance.

Shute’s moral compass emerges from the motivations and aspirations of *his* protagonists: they are representatives rather than delegates. He has no master plan of explanation other than that of accurate recording of an authentic reality in which he had an engineer’s curiosity.

In Ruined City there are not two polarities, but three and the third urban scene is in the fictitious Eastern European city of Laevatia where Warren negotiates the shipping deal that starts the restoration of the Sharples shipyard. Each link in this chain must be competent to carry the weight of the other transactions but each in turn is supported by them .

6

But what was “Nevil Shute’s Time” in the years in which he worked as a novelist and as an engineer? These were years of a stern re-examination of the fundamentals of

that society and a crisis of culture in England in the period following the First Great War.

Shute deals throughout his novels with themes and materials which are apparently pretty commonplace. He was an engineer himself who understood the importance of engineering in developing the useful technology of English society. He understood its purposes as being to improve the lives and the well being of ordinary people. For Shute technology is itself a cultural creation and a cultural end in its own right serving both large and small purposes. It brings its own special enjoyment and embodies its own ethic and above all it has to be managed by those who are technically-competent and ethically-aware.

Shute understands both these arenas as providing opportunity for technological mastery, leading to control over oneself and others. These are socio-technical systems that have to be managed.

Shute's novels are full of quite detailed technical descriptions, sometimes almost appearing to be extracts from manuals of instruction. In other hands this content would be seen as mere padding or as indigestible gobbets of information, to be skipped over in pursuit of the main lines of plot and character. But in Shute's hands these elements are not tedious for they are intrinsic to the action and essential to the delineation of motive.

Shute's canvas is wide: his novels represent a different, more positive and more detailed account of the Condition of England. He had discerned the main battle lines of the forthcoming standoff between these two polar opposite traditions and proposed a middle way.

It is close, in some ways, to the German tradition of Technik and it was a way of life with which Shute was familiar in the industry of his day (CIEP, 1979).

His description of the large aircraft manufacturing plant visited by Tom Cutter in "Round the Bend" (Shute, 1954), one of Shute's postwar novels that foreshadows uncannily accurately, the forthcoming growth of the Middle East airline industry, indicates how highly he regarded those UK organizations that did successfully master their operating technologies and their management. Shute writes in the main from an anti-establishment perspective and to some extent this is not surprising, given the circumstances of his background and upbringing.

He was a provincial himself from Cornwall, who spent the formative years of his childhood in Ireland, never entered the governing establishment, and eventually emigrated to that most provincial, separate and anti-establishment former colony, Australia, to become, even there, a provincial colonial.

He relocated in the semi-rural area to the south of Melbourne, not in Sydney, the nearest thing Australia had to offer to the European capital cities and the Old World cultural values they aped. Melbourne, then as now, was more provincial and old fashioned and ever so slightly stuffy. These were the values Shute understood and was comfortable with. He trusted in the engineering values of clarity, precision, persistence and mastery of detail. Shute's implicit ideal is a world in which technology is a dominant, but not an overpowering Force, one which frames the ends of human action and is ultimately at the service of human motives. But in order for this to occur, the technology must be learned, controlled, mastered, managed and developed, indeed loved.

In Rilke's immortal phrase technology is the "orange" that must be "danced" if man is to obtain full value from his time among the diverse and challenging artefacts of modern science.

But there is more to Shute's Weltanschauung and it is not all positive.

Shute knew that scientists, once unleashed on a problem would inevitably create technologies, that, if they existed, would be used. He had been close to the technologies of war for most of his working life as an engineer. He worked in Whitehall on Secret Weapons for most of the 1939-45 War and he knew that weapons of war, once created, would be used, sooner or later. He genuinely feared the nuclear arms race because his engineer's sense told him that weapons once created would probably be used.

Shute knew also that the control of technology is the management of risk and that Murphy's law usually turns out to be a pretty good guide to likely outcomes. *(Weir, 1993)

Shute's mode of presentation of these powerful ideas is managerial in that his writing style is simple, straightforward and direct, even sparse, yet the topics he deals with are complex and significant. His art was to make complex ideas appear simple and to increase understanding and the possibilities to control risky situations rather than to amaze and mystify with his erudition.

The themes of his novels encompass such wide ranging issues as globalisation, multiracialism, the changing structures of the economic system and intercultural understanding and he offers no easy solutions to the problems he poses (Weir, 1999) . But the themes of technology and the necessity for the management of risky technology based on assured craft principles to be the central concern of civilized society remain persistent throughout his work . He leans towards solutions which empower competent individuals rather than the centralized apparatus of government and while his preference is for a free-enterprise and essentially capitalistic form of economic organization, he clearly recognizes from the early novels like “ Lonely Road” and “ Ruined City” down to “ Trustee from the Toolroom” the need for wealth, power and position to be utilised in terms of the responsibilities owed by the more powerful to those less fortunate.

But he proposed no new ideology and he ascribed to no all-encompassing solution in an ideological sense. He realised that the moral choices of individuals would need to become ever more conditioned by the knowledge of the powers inherent in new technologies and that these choices could only be available to those who understood the potential and the limitations of these technologies and had demonstrated the capability to manage them effectively in the interests of others.

Shute’s intellectual message is often masked by the effortless, ingenuousness or indeed artlessness of his prose.

The themes of his novels are by no means trivial or sentimental. Many dealt with the effects of war on society and on established social structures and others with the English class system, unemployment and provincial urban decline; one with the aftermath of the nuclear holocaust. In terms of the numbers of readers who accessed his books and films, it is credible to maintain (as apparently did Bertrand Russell) that “On the Beach” had more influence than any Campaigns for Nuclear Disarmament or 1960s protest marches ...and “ On the Beach “ was published in 1957 .

He did not shrink from such significant issues as the end of colonialism or the failure of Western officialdom to foretell the rising economic power of the nascent East .(Weir, 2002) He understood the implacable necessity of the impending multi-racial society.

But he did not isolate himself as a member of society from the concerns of the ordinary people whose characters he portrayed so credibly. He was not as Sartre

claimed to be, an “*être déraciné*”, for he was both grounded and engaged. But he does not seem to have consciously sought out other “intellectuals” either.

As critical social scientists it is the curse of our discipline to tread an uneasy path between the sterility of abstracted, positivistic scientism and the vacuity of passionate but unthinking social engagement. From the 1960’s onward we have seen the professionalism of our craft torn between these two competing, but *au fond* partial, paradigms .

Now once again we are cast adrift on a windless sea, with our post-modernist sails only half blown by second-hand puffs of torpid air. We seek theory and we crave precision but above all we desperately need to make a difference to ameliorate the problems which afflict contemporary society to justify the expansive hopes of Weber ,Durkheim , Pareto and Simmel.

We need new styles and new life-forms as a trade and the role-model of the successful novelist who can also function effectively in other domains of practice as an engineer, industrial manager, businessman and well-informed social analyst and critic is certainly worth our serious consideration.

A Fortiori it is timely to consider why, in theoretical writings we regularly assign “Popular Culture” to the Objective and Accusative cases of our discourse and dismiss their power as aspects of social agency. Nevil Shute was a successful best-selling novelist but he knew more about English society than most of his University based and theoretically sophisticated contemporaries and you may learn more about the class system and the structures of organisational management and entrepreneurship in England in mid century from Shute than from many more self-consciously erudite academic interpreters.

Czarniawska quotes Lyotard’s maxim that “knowledge is not the same as science ,especially in its contemporary form.” and this apparent need to contrast narrative knowledge with scientific knowledge is quite widespread in sociological work .*

But this emphasis leads us to neglect the accomplishments of those who are competent in *both* forms of communication—for example Alfred Schutz as a banker ,philosopher and sociologist, Shute as an engineer, entrepreneur and novelist .

Shute was a master of the science and craft of communication. His ideas are not simple and certainly not simplistic but they are communicated in an accessible manner. He writes, as managers need to write, to be clear and to be understood. Shute understands that this skill is also a responsibility, for the members of society to be

able to understand themselves and others they must first learn to communicate, to listen as well as to expound. His characters epitomise the roles they represent without deteriorating into stereotypical parody. His characters may act within the bounds of their delineated possibilities in the life-worlds they inhabit, but they never degenerate into mere types.

Shute's method of presentation is multi-layered and the open-endedness of his plotting permits the reader to multiply perceived outcomes, to ask questions and to reflect on life, rather than to merely accept and digest the views of others. It is a style that permits, rather than mandates, a reflexive approach to its substantive content.

Shute's positioning in this theoretical space is not unlike that of Bourdieu's *Logic of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1990)..

In *Ruined City*, the air is always there as a framework and support for the evolution of the plotting. In the first two pages Warren flies after lunch at the Savoy and dinner at his club to Amsterdam, Malmo, Stockholm, Helsinki, Tallinn , Riga, Berlin on business, and back again to Croydon. Then "he reached his house in Grosvenor Square before the milk, before his servants were awake, slept for an hour, had a bath and dressed, and went down to his office in the city. "(Shute, 1938, p 6) It is clear that Henry Warren is a workaholic. The popular image of the 1930s may perhaps be gleaned from the movies in which Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers danced the night away in white tie and tails and Fortuny dresses. But for Shute's Henry Warren there is work to be done. He flies not down to Rio to dance and party but to the Eastern Baltic and the Balkan States to do business because that is where the work is. The problem in Sharples and towns like it is not overwork but the absence of work. He goes hunter-gathering to bring craft employment back to the nest.

His critique of the "City" in "Ruined City" is essentially that of a technocrat: these systems for generating wealth and employment had ceased to work and must be superseded by better socio-technical systems. The technology in Ruined City, No Highway, On the Beach is up to date and accurate.

But Shute is a vital source for understanding how the new professional managers in mid-century Britain, America and Australia were starting to think of themselves and to define their craft and crystallize their role in a technologically-based, globalizing and multi-racial society. Shute used a rather simple typology to distinguish the types of manager needed in the aviation industry. When, in 1938, Nevil Norway was eased out of the company he had formed, Airspeed Ltd he agreed that it was probably time

to move on. Two kinds of people shape companies, he argued: “Starters” and “Runners” He had been the entrepreneur and a leader of the creative dynamic that had put the company together but he was not suited to running it day by day.*

It is arguable that Shute’s entire oeuvre represents no less than a lifetime’s act of atonement for his family’s part in creating the Armageddon of the First World War which had led to the untimely deaths of other more talented and promising contemporaries whose lights had been extinguished for ever on the battlefields of Flanders, along with that of his older brother Fred. The specific tragedy of the Norway family was a symbol for that of a generation and in finding his individual answer to the questions that his life posed to him, Nevil Shute Norway the engineer, manager and businessman and Nevil Shute the best-selling novelist were working together to realise an agenda for a new generation of English people.

Shute spoke for England and for the possibilities of a new society in the world after the wars. We understand that society and its possibilities the better for his fictional constructions of it. In introducing a pedagogic critique of how society works through fiction rather than theory, as well as in starting to understand the realities of technical management in England in mid-century, Nevil Shute’s work is a good place to start. Better perhaps than board room minute books, the ultimate fiction.

He was a highly successful manager, entrepreneur and technical innovator: he knew about management and lived as a manager for many years and he wrote about it well. He lived for several years a stone’s throw from what is now York St John University. His first aircraft factory, in the old bus garage in Piccadilly was demolished in 2015 Arguably Nevil Shute’s writings were vastly more influential than many of those cited in the official canons of management “history”. His works are used in engineering education but it seems more often in other countries than the UK (Oosthuizen, 2006). Maybe there is scope for a more regular use of works of fiction like Shute’s in teaching management through history also through the lens of a fiction writer who was more popular with readers than with critics, with ordinary people rather than either members of the cultural or business elites because he spoke to their concerns very directly through his novels, written plainly and engagingly and through his blockbuster Award winning movies.

Slotkin proposes a stronger case for the continued co-existence of these genres.

that “because the novel imaginatively recovers the indeterminacy of a past time, the form allows writer and reader to explore those alternative possibilities for belief, action, and political change, unrealized by history, which existed in the past.” (Slotkin, 2005).

In our family it is “traditional” to add a full Blue Wensleydale cheese to the groaning board. It usually all gets eaten most of it with mince pies, Christmas cake, even with Christmas pudding. The counterpoint of sweet and savoury is delicious but sometimes remarked on critically by visitors from south of Sheffield. There is even a Yorkshire saying that “apple pie without the cheese is like a kiss without a squeeze”. History with the aid of appropriate fiction in a co-created narrative of apple pie and cheese illuminates the narrative creating through this shared knowledge a newer stance on experienced “reality”. Without this fictional enrichment the *tactics* available to the present would be a lacklustre, dull disembodied affair.

END

References

- Alvesson, M., & Kärreman, D. (2000). Taking the Linguistic Turn in Organizational Research: Challenges, Responses, Consequences. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 36(2), 136–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886300362002>
- Barnes, T.J. and Duncan, J.S.(1992) *Writing Words: Discourse, text and metaphor in the representation of landscape* : London: Routledge
- Barthes, R. (1977) *The Death of the Author*, in R. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, pp. 142–148, London: Fontana Press.
- Barthes, R. (1957) *Mythologies*, Paris: Seuil.
- Barthes, R. (1984) *Image – Music – Text*, trans. from the French by S. Heath, London: Flamingo/Fontana
- Bell, C. :1938: *Civilization*: London:Penguin
- Blauvelt, A. (2003) *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life*, Walker Art Center. 2003.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Cam, H. (1961) *Historical Novels*: Historical Association pamphlet no 48
- CIEP (1979) *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Engineering Profession*: HMSO

Copland, H. (1903) There are bold pilots and there are old pilots but there are no old, bold pilots".attributed to Henry Copland, a pioneer aviator but quoted by Shute in Slide Rule

Czarniawska,B.:1997:*Narrating the Organization* :Chicago : University of Chicago Press

De Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

De Certeau, M. (1992) *The Writing of History*: New York Columbia University Press

Eagleton, T. (2011) *Literary Theory*, New York, Wiley

Gregory D., Walford R. (1989) *Introduction: Making Geography*. In: Gregory D., Walford R. (eds) *Horizons in Human Geography*. Horizons in Geography. Palgrave, London

Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*: Oxford: Basil Blackwell

Liotard ,J-F.:1979:*The Post-Modern Condition : A report on Knowledge* : Manchester : Manchester University Press

Marcus, G.E. and Fischer,M.J. *Anthropology as cultural critique: an experimental moment in the human sciences*: Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Norway, A.H. (1899) *Highways and Byways in Yorkshire* - : London: Macmillan & Co,

Oosthuizen: P.H (2006) Using the works of Nevil Shute in Engineering education: : 2nd International CDIO Conference Linkoping University: Linkoping, Sweden: 13 to 14 June 2006

Ricoeur, P. (1971) The Model of the Text: meaningful action considered as a text;

Social Research Vol. 38, No. 3 (Autumn 1971), pp. 529-562

Robinson, J.H. (1930) The Newer Ways of Historians : *The American Historical Review* : XXXV : January 1930 p251

St-Exupery A. :1931:*Vol de Nuit* : Paris : Gallimard

St Leonards (2016) History of St Leonards place ACCESSED AT

<http://stleonardsplace.co.uk/history/> on April 12 2016

Shute, N. (1926) *Marazan*: London: Castell

- Shute, N. (1928) *So Disdained*: London: Castell
- Shute, N. (1932) *Lonely Road*: London: Cassell
- Shute, N.:1938: *Ruined City* :London: Cassell
- Shute ,N.: (1941): *Pied Piper* : London: Heinemann
- Shute, N.:(1954) *Slide Rule : The Autobiography of an Engineer* London
Heinemann
- Shute, N.:1944: *Pastoral*: London: Heinemann
- Shute, N.: 1962: *Trustee From The Toolroom*:London: Heinemann
- Slotkin, R. (2005) Fiction for the Purposes of History, *Rethinking History*, 9:2-3, 221-236, DOI: [10.1080/13642520500149152](https://doi.org/10.1080/13642520500149152)
- Snow, C.P.: 1968:*The Two Cultures* :London : Macmillan
- Shute, N.: 1955: *Round The Bend* : London : Heinemann
- Sinclair, U. (1906) *The Jungle*: Doubleday, Page
- Taylor, A.M. (1938) The Historical Novel: As a Source in History: *The Sewanee Review* Vol. 46, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1938), pp. 459-479
- Wagner, H.R.:1983: *Alfred Schutz : An Intellectual Biography* : Chicago : University of Chicago Press
- Weir, D.T.H.: 1999: The Interwar Period, its politics and economics ,as revealed in the writings of Nevil Shute :paper given at the Nevil Shute Centennial Conference : Albuquerque
- Weir, D.T.H.:1993: Why Big Planes Crash and Big Companies Fail: in Disaster Prevention and Management: Vol 2 no 2
- Weir, David 2001 Nevil Shute and the Asian religion of engineering: Nevil Shute Society Conference: Frankston:
- Hayden White (2005) Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality,*Rethinking History*, 9:2-3, 147-157, DOI: [10.1080/13642520500149061](https://doi.org/10.1080/13642520500149061)