

Introduction to *Landfall* by Nevil Shute for Valancourt Books

Introduction

Nevil Shute is probably best known for being the author of two novels that were turned into successful films. *A Town Like Alice* concerns the return to Malaya after the war of a former English female POW, and the rekindling of a romance with a man with whom she had been incarcerated. She uses an inheritance to bring prosperity to a remote town in the Northern Territories of Australia. In contrast, *On the Beach* is an apocalyptic vision of a post-nuclear world, where the inhabitants of Australia (where Shute had emigrated after the Second World War) await their fate as deadly radiation approaches from the northern hemisphere. The novel, which appeared at the height of the Cold War in 1957, remains a powerfully bleak commentary on the catastrophic possibility of mankind's self-inflicted oblivion. Both of these novels come from the final phase of Shute's career, and are not entirely typical of his output.

Shute produced twenty-four novels and an autobiography in a writing career that began in a flurry of rejections, with an eventual first publication in 1926, and ended with his death in 1960. Trained as an aeronautical engineer, Shute deployed his knowledge of aircraft in many of his novels. The technical aspects of engineering, on the face of it not the most promising material for fiction, are handled adroitly by the author, and often play an integral part in the narrative. In the initial phase of his career, his work was perhaps derivative: the shade of John Buchan can be discerned behind *So Disdained* (1927) his second novel, which culminates in a chase into fascist Italy, and *Lonely Road* (1932), an espionage thriller in which a middle-aged misfit manages to thwart a right-wing conspiracy to seize political control of Britain. As Shute's career continued, he developed a distinctive narrative style, in which the lives of his characters were often defined by their interaction with technology, usually related to aircraft.

Landfall was first published in 1940, at the height of the German assault on England, and concerns the experiences of a young pilot, Roderick "Jerry" Chambers, of RAF Coastal Command, whose job is to protect Allied shipping from attack by German submarines. Given the date of publication it might easily have followed a pattern familiar in much war-time fiction, of manly heroic deeds and victory against impossible odds, and a saccharine romantic subplot. Instead, Shute provides a mainly low-key narrative, in which the pleasantly facetious Jerry is seen wooing Mona, a local barmaid, against the backdrop of the potentially dangerous missions he flies. The writing is spare and focused, and the developing relationship between the two is quickly sketched in, emphasising the sense of urgency engendered by war.

Soon after establishing Jerry and Mona's mutual attraction (although there is no 'declaration of love' scene in the text), Shute's attention shifts to the technical detail of Jerry's dangerous occupation. Shute does not shrink from presenting the reader with the minutiae of the pilots' routine. This early passage is typical of Shute's attention to detail:

The pilots finished their breakfast, pulled on their heavy coats, and went down to the hangar. The machines were already out upon the tarmac with their engines running; grey light was stealing across the sodden aerodrome. In the pilot's room the young men changed into their combination flying suits, pulled on their fur-lined boots, buckled the helmets on their heads. The machines they were flying were enclosed monoplanes with twin engines; in summer they would dispense with helmets. Now they wore them for warmth.

Each machine carried a crew of four, an officer, a sergeant as second pilot, a wireless telegraphist, and an air gunner. They carried two one-hundred-pound bombs and a number of twenty-pound, and had fuel for about six hours' flight.

Shute's knowledge and experience (he was a Lieutenant Commander in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve) provided him with ready material for his fiction, and this is very evident in *Landfall*, the second part of which deals with the development of secret weaponry, an enterprise with which Shute was engaged.

At the centre of the plot is the mystery of the submarine sunk by Jerry as it approaches the channel ports. The suspicion, soon confirmed, that Jerry has accidentally sunk a British sub, is used by Shute to explore the human cost of war, a theme that is common to a good many of his novels. The crucial incident is based on a true event, which actually took place on the same day, December 3rd, 1939, as the one described in the novel. A British submarine, HMS Snapper, was attacked, and nearly sunk off the Dutch coast by what was strongly believed to be a Coastal Command plane. The subsequent animosity between officers of the Navy and the Air Force is described in the reminiscences of the Snapper's captain, Commander William King.ⁱ Shute's account of the inter-service rivalry, which becomes a further important plot device, seems to chime with King's. It is remarkable that he was able to get this lightly fictionalised version of the event past the censors.

Landfall is not great art, but as a document of a particular moment in wartime Britain, and as an entertaining and sympathetic account of service life, it is satisfyingly authentic.

ⁱ *The Stick and the Stars* (London: Hutchinson, 1958)