

Introduction to *An Old Captivity* by Nevil Shute for Valancourt Books

Introduction

Nevil Shute Norway, who dropped his surname for his authorial persona, completed a remarkable six-month journey in 1948-49, flying a single engine Percival Proctor aeroplane from England, through southern Europe into the Middle East, across the Indian sub-continent and south-east Asia to Australia, and back home. Shute piloted the plane, accompanied by a navigator, James Riddell, whose account of the adventure, *Flight of Fancy*, is an entertaining period piece. This 30,000-mile trip was the culmination of a lifetime spent dealing with aircraft of all sorts, and directly led to Shute's settling in Australia, where he died in 1960.

Shute's prolific output as a writer was intimately connected to his profession as an aeronautical engineer. Most of his twenty-four novels feature pilots and aircraft, so *An Old Captivity* is typical, and the very detailed account in the novel of flight procedures, and the sheer hard graft of flying in the days before auto-pilots and GPS navigation systems, is clearly based on Shute's extensive expertise, as demonstrated in his epic post-war flight.

Unlike the other Shute novel published in 1940, *Landfall*, which deals with contemporary wartime events, *An Old Captivity* is set very precisely in a six-month period in 1933, and no mention of the forthcoming war is made. In fact, a meticulous attention to external detail is one of the characteristics of the novel, which, for the main part of its length sets out to describe the journey by single-engined cabin seaplane from Southampton to Greenland of Donald Ross, the main protagonist, and the Lockwoods, father and daughter, for the purpose of conducting an aerial photographic survey of a Viking settlement.

Shute must have been aware of the excavations that took place in 1932 at Brattahlíð, the Greenland farm settlement of Erik the Red, led by the Danish archaeologist Poul Nørlund, who found the remains of a Christian church at the

site. In *An Old Captivity*, Lockwood, the Oxford don who hires Ross, is investigating the links between the Celtic peoples and the Vikings, hypothesising that the church might have been built by the Celts.

For another author, the trip to Greenland might have been merely a prelude to the main event: for Shute, the trip is, at least in terms of pages occupied, the major element in the narrative. We are two-thirds of the way through the text before Brattahlíð, or Brattalid as Shute calls it, is reached. What precedes that moment is a painstakingly detailed account of the practical obstacles that Ross must overcome in order to complete his mission, from the logistics of organising sufficient fuel in the right places to the protocol for obtaining a visa for Greenland. The tone is captured early on, when Ross reflects on his initial conversation with Lockwood:

There would be the most terrific lot of work in this thing, if it ever came off. [...] Apart from all the work of flying and maintaining the seaplane he would have to see to all the camping gear, the clothing of his passenger, the food supplies. Most of this stuff would have to come with them in the machine...

Much of the first part of the novel is taken up by descriptions of the types of activity that Ross anticipates here. The relatively short Greenland section of the novel takes on an almost anthropological tone, as Ross and his passengers are obliged to overnight with a group of Eskimos. Shute's style – plain, terse even, becomes slightly more colourful as the buttoned-up middle class Alix Lockwood is thrust into a world where survival is all that matters: "Inside the hut, the smell hit them like a blow in the face, a mixed smell of rotten meat, urine, dogs and babies. For a moment or two it was nauseating. Alix drew back in disgust." Here, and elsewhere, Shute's conservative, imperialist attitudes are noticeable.

The most startling aspect of the narrative is the lyrical account in chapter 9 of the lives of Haki and Hekja, Scottish slaves of Leif Erikson, who are mentioned in the medieval Icelandic Saga of Erik the Red. This dream-like section establishes the

link that Lockwood is seeking between the Celts and the Vikings, and sets the scene for the dénouement in Cape Cod.

The dream has been foreshadowed in the opening frame narrative, a device that Shute often used, but which seems redundant here. In it, a first-person narrator, the psychiatrist Morgan, encounters Ross on a train bound for Rome five years after the events described in the main narrative, and encourages him to tell the tale that forms the body of the text, as a way of dealing with Ross's unease. There is no attempt in the main third-person narrative to present the words as Ross's, and Morgan does not figure subsequently.

An Old Captivity showcases the best and worst of Nevil Shute. It is a slow-building tale with a startling late twist, replete with intricate aeronautical lore, and some vivid evocations of a now almost extinct way of life. Some readers may balk at the initial slow pace, but in the end Shute engages our attention and pilots the tale to a satisfying conclusion.

Rob Spence