

POST called on Australia's richest, shyest writer—but he wouldn't come to the door!

SHUTE — the silent success

ROBINSON ROAD, Langwarrin, is a typical unmade Australian bush track. It is potholed, and narrow, slippery and treacherous in winter, dusty in summer. It winds through acres of tea-tree scrub and past a dozen sleepy farms in the bush behind Frankston, Victoria.

But Robinson Road is the most important road in Australia to some of the biggest men in the publishing and film worlds of London, New York — and Hollywood.

It has nothing to distinguish it from a hundred bush tracks like it, anywhere in Australia.

It is where Nevil Shute, the aeronautical engineer - turned novelist, one of the most successful writers of modern times, has made his Australian home.

From Robinson Road to publishers in Britain, the Shute manuscripts come from the Robinson Road studios of the Age, and come in an endless streak of hefty cheques.

Any day now a \$100,000 cheque will come to Robinson Road—from producer Stanley Kramer, in Hollywood.

It will be in payment for the film rights to Shute's latest best-seller, "On the Beach," the story of Melbourne's last hours as the last outpost of life in a world destroyed by hydrogen bombs and radiation.

Shute was headline news a few weeks ago when Kramer announced

in Hollywood that he had bought the film rights and was preparing to shoot the picture in its own setting, Melbourne.

Most writers would think they were set for life if they could write ONE book good enough to be made into a big-budget film. Shute does it all the time.

Among his stories that have been winners on the screen are "Pied Piper" (about the last days of the war in France, 1940 — it was one of the most poignant and dramatic stories of the war), "No Highway in the Sky" (film version of Shute's best-selling "No Highway in the Sky" — a scientist's fight to prove his theory that metal fatigue will kill all air liners. Months after the film was made, the first Comet jet airliner disasters occurred. The cause: metal fatigue!).

Shute wrote his "A Town Like Alice," which became another high-successful film, after he had flown out to Australia in 1949 to look us over.

Nevil Shute has been a big-name novelist for 20 years. Before that

he was a big name in British aeronautical circles.

In fact, he is better known by name to Australians than any Australian-born writer.

His books certainly sell more copies in Australia than anything written by any Australian.

But Shute, the man, what is he like? Where and how does he live? What does he do when he's not writing? Does he travel among us, getting material? Those are questions few people in this country can answer, because the only time Nevil Shute's name appears in the newspapers is when he has written another best seller, or when a film company buys his story for a fat fee.

When the news came of Hollywood's purchase of "On The Beach" POST decided it was time to go behind the bookstalls and find the real Nevil Shute.

We'd seek answers to questions about him all of his readers, and our readers, too, must be asking: Where to find him? That was the first question.

His full name, we knew, was Nevil Shute Norway. First we tried the telephone directory. No Nevil Shute or Nevil S. Norway listed there.

"Not listed"

Our book publishing contacts put us on a track. "He lives at Red Hill, down Dramans way, on the Mornington Peninsula," they said.

On to the telephone again. Trunk lines. "Nevil Shute or Norway, at Red Hill, Dramans or Mornington," we ordered. A long wait, and then the answer. "Sorry, Mr. Shute, or Mr. Norway, is not listed," we were told.

Well, that didn't surprise us exactly. A busy author probably disliked telephones, anyway, we reasoned. Perhaps he purposely didn't have a telephone connected.

LEFT: A rare photograph of Nevil Shute and his wife, taken when they reached Australia in 1950 to make their home. Shute now refuses to pose for pictures, or give Press interviews.

25 miles from Frankston, about five miles from Melbourne, the gateway to the Mornington Peninsula. He should be easy to trace from there, we figured. At a swank Frankston hotel we were told, "Nevil Shute? Yes, sir, he lives at Mount Eliza. I think I'm not sure of the correct address, though. Better inquire at the florists. They know everyone who's anyone."

The slim young woman at the florist shop said brightly, "Mr. Shute? Of course, he's living at Cranbourne. He passed this way an hour ago. No, I don't know EXACTLY where he lives. But he's often in town here. A charming man."

More inquiries at Frankston convinced us that Shute lived "somewhere along Robinson Road, Langwarrin."

Robinson Road was a track off the main road to Hastings, about four miles from Frankston. We bumped along it until we came to a farmhouse.

A tired-faced woman answered our knock. "Mr. Shute? Yes, he lives up the road a bit. About a mile or so. You can't miss it. Lovely new home, cream brick, with a lovely wall in front and a big drive up to the house. Look for two big silver water tanks."

We found it, just as she'd described it, two miles up the road. A low, modern ranch-style home with a tiled roof, nestling under two big gums, 200 yards in from the road. A new station wagon, and a Volkswagen rested in the double

garage built at one end of the house.

No one was in sight. Not even a dog. Green paddocks stretched for acres around us, and the sun shone brightly. This was our idea of a farm property.

We noted, with surprise, that telephone lines led to the house. The drive curved in a circle, and we stopped outside the front door. We knocked. No answer. Knocked again.

An elderly, white-haired woman came at last. We'd seen a picture of her somewhere. It was Mrs. Shute. "Is this Mr. Shute's residence?" we asked.

'You've no chance'

"This is Mr. NORWAY'S residence," she corrected us.

"Er, yes, Norway. Sorry. We always seem to think of it as Shute," we stammered. "Is Mr. Norway at home now? We are from Australasian Post magazine. We would like a few words with him."

She gave us a quick smile — of sympathy, we thought. "Mr. Norway does not see the Press. I don't think you have any chance of an interview with him. However, if you wait here a moment I will ask him."

She disappeared inside the house. A minute later, another woman appeared, a slight, middle-aged Englishwoman.

"I am Mr. Norway's secretary. I am sorry, but Mr. Norway cannot see you. He never gives inter-

views to the Press. He feels if he makes an exception this time he will always have to do it."

She seemed quite definite, but POST tried again. "Er . . . we know Mr. Norway must be a very busy man, but the interview we have in mind would not take up much of his time. We would be glad to give our readers — who, no doubt, are also HIS readers — a personal pen picture of Mr. Shute . . . Norway, as he is today."

"We'd like to answer their curiosity about . . . er . . . the kind of room he works in, the hours he works, his other interests . . . some of his ideas on Australia as a source of stories . . . things like that, that no one seems to know about him."

The secretary gave us the same kind of sympathetic smile. "I am sorry. I really am, but Mr. Norway will not see you, not today. If you like I will tell him what you have told me, and perhaps I could write you a letter giving you his answer." We agreed that that would be an idea, and suggested that we telephone her later in the day, to get the author's answer.

"Make it tomorrow," she said. "We are very busy today."

POST gave Mr. Shute two days to reconsider, then we rang back. The same answer: "Sorry, Mr. Norway will not see you. He prefers to remain in the background. He regrets he cannot alter his decision."

Well, we can say one thing about Nevil Shute. He gives one of the palest brush-offs in the business!

Back at the office, we dug out our file on author Shute, and discovered he first became famous in the late 1920's as one of the designers of the airship R100, first airship to cross the Atlantic.

He founded the famous British aircraft manufacturing firm, Airspeed Limited, and was one of its joint managing directors.

Before the war his novels began to take more and more of his time. Eventually he left the aircraft industry to write. Almost immediately he became a best selling author.

In February, 1939, Shute first revealed his uncanny knack of forecasting the future with accuracy. His novel, "What Happened to the Corbetta" told in detail, and with unflinching precision, the effects of a sudden air raid on Southampton, and the reactions of the people, crouching in air raid shelters, determined never to be beaten.

Fabulous income

Just over 12 months later, all he had foretold came true, when the Nazis made the first of their heavy air raids on the city.

Shute served as a Commander in the Royal Navy during the war, and continued to write. His "Pied Piper" was scribbled in notebooks during off duty periods.

Between 1918 and 1948 his novels earned him a fabulous income. From America alone, in those years, he netted \$209,000 (about £138,000).

ABOVE: Far removed from traffic noises, well away from neighbors, this is the modern home Nevil Shute has built on his 30-acre property near Melbourne. Here he writes, undisturbed.

He was in the highest income tax bracket in Britain, paying 18/6 tax in the U. That was one of the reasons he decided to come to Australia — not the only reason, for Australian taxes are high enough for those with very big incomes.

Shute decided Australia was the country with the greatest future. He had a yearning to get away from a Britain he considered tired and old. In 1950 he and his wife settled in Melbourne. Their daughter, then in her late teens, followed a little later.

Shute didn't come to Australia to retire, and he started proving it almost straight away. From his typewriter came a stream of new novels — "Boysen" for a Wren, "The Far Country," "Beyond the Black Stamp" . . .

Reviewing "The Far Country," one well-known Melbourne critic said, "During the war we used to say 'Such-and-such an inventor, or such-and-such a general is worth a division of troops!'"

"In peacetime, we can truthfully say that Nevil Shute is worth a division of troops! A goodly mission and half a Government department!"