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MATHEMATICIAN TURNED AUTHOR

THE paradoxes of authorship have seldom been shown more clearly than in the case of Nevil Shute, the British novelist who visited New Zealand this month to attend the Booksellers' Conference at Wairakei. Mr. Shute, whose 16 novels have sold around three million copies, stopped for a day in Wellington on his way back to Australia, where he now lives, and talked to the Press about himself and his work. He is a person you wouldn't notice in a crowd, with a mild, pink face and an abashed manner. Yet after he had been talking for a while he revealed himself to be a man of charm and intelligence, and possessing a large number of original and interesting ideas.

He was asked whether he didn't miss the literary life of London since he had emigrated to Australia.

"As a matter of fact, I've never lived in London," he said. "I've never mixed with the literary crowd and don't know any of them. I've always preferred to live out of London. All my friends are engineers and serving officers. I never read novels. Most of my reading is in the field of current affairs and technical matters. I began life as a mathematician, you know, and I regard myself as basically an engineer who writes for fun."

Nevil Shute's real name is Nevil Shute Norway, and it is under this head that he is listed in *Who's Who*, followed by the letters B.A. Oxon; F.R.Ae.S. The entry notes that he was born in 1899 and attended Balliol College at Oxford, served in the war as a private in the Suffolk Regiment, and began his aeronautical career as a stress and performance calculator for the de Havilland

Aircraft Co. Ltd., from 1922 to 1924. The following year he became Chief Calculator for the Airship Guarantee Company, and worked on construction of the Rigid Airship R.100. He became their Deputy Chief Engineer, and in 1930 twice flew the Atlantic in the R.100 as a representative of the con-



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"I never read novels"

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structors. He then became Managing Director of the Yorkshire Aeroplane Club, and in 1931 founded his own construction company, Airspeed Limited, who are best known in this country for their advanced twin-engined trainer the Airspeed Oxford.

He was Joint Managing Director of Airspeed Limited for eight years, but in 1938 he "retired from industry and took up writing as a main pursuit." This second career was interrupted by the war. He was commissioned in the R.N.V.R. in 1940, became a Lieutenant-Commander in 1941, and retired in 1945. A few years after the war ended he left England and took up residence in Australia with his wife and two daughters. Before coming out to this part of the world he went to the United States on a lecture tour which he regarded in the nature of a reconnaissance to see if he would like to settle there. But he decided to remain within the Commonwealth, and is now very happy in Australia.

The mystery of why a man who had made such a successful career in aeronautics should decide at the age of 39 to give it all up to write fiction is one that Mr. Shute may attempt to explain in his autobiographical volume, *Slide Rule*, which is shortly to be published. But part of the explanation at least was given by him when he met the Press in Wellington. He said that he began writing in 1920, so that for eighteen years he must have been living a kind of double life, designing aeroplanes and airships by day and writing short stories and novels at night. His first published novel was *Marazan*, which came out in 1926. It was two years before he published another, and the next two were published at intervals of four and six years respectively. He had written only four novels when he retired from indus-

(continued on next page)

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 30, 1954.