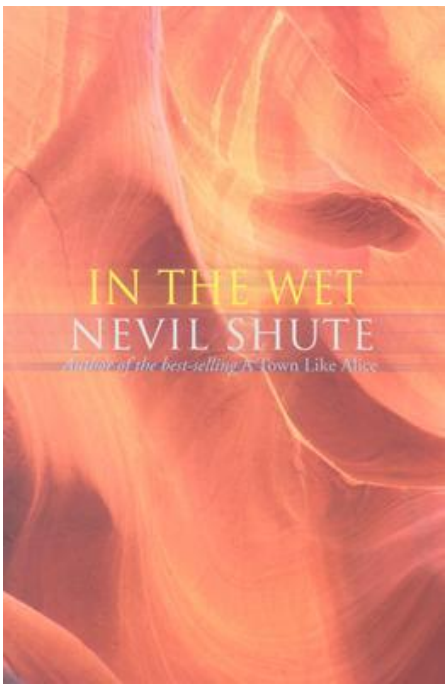

In the Wet

Nevil Shute

In the Wet

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In the Wet Nevil Shute
Originally published in 1953, IN THE WET is Nevil Shute's speculative glance into the future of the British Empire. An elderly clergyman stationed in the Australian bush is called to the bedside of a dying derelict. In his delirium Stevie tells a story of England in 1983 through the medium of a squadron air pilot in the service of Queen Elizabeth II.

In the Wet Details

Date	:	Published January 1st 2000 by House of Stratus (first published 1953)
ISBN	:	9781842322543
Author	:	Nevil Shute
Format	:	Paperback 344 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Cultural, Australia, Adventure, Science Fiction, Classics

From Reader Review In the Wet for online ebook

JayeL says

2016: I have previously read the print. I bought the audio and this is the first time I am listening to the audio. This story is one of his more confusing, because the transitions are a little bit abrupt and the flashbacks are longer so there were a few moments where I lost where I was because of the abrupt transition. The audio is easier to follow.

The most interesting part of this book are the political aspects. This is a book written in the 1950s, taking place in the 1980s. It is very interesting to see the characters navigate the political and cultural aspects of the situations.

Jane Jago says

OK let's do the politics first. I have read reviews from people who can't get past Nevil Shute's politics, and if you are a reader who wants to apply a twenty-first century political sensibility to a novel written more than sixty years ago there's plenty to get hot under the collar about. And if it's going to upset you you are probably best off avoiding this author altogether. All his novels are informed by the same political stance, and although it may be a bit more blatant in this book it's there in them all.

However. I'm not too bothered by the man's politics. I see this novel as being very much of its time, but also as exhibiting an eye and a hand for storytelling that I find intensely readable.

The story takes us from Australia in the 1950s to Shute's imagination of what England may be like in the 1980s. The narrative carries well, and Shute's vision of what was for him the future is believable.

I enjoyed it.

So. If you like a rattling good tale, give this a go. But don't blame me if the politics pees you off.

Maria says

I really liked some parts of this book. It was a fairly good story, some adventure, politics, romance, and humor. Really the only thing I didn't like about the book was that it felt like the author basically made up the romance (which is probably the main thread throughout the story) in order to foist his political opinions on the reader. I am fine with authors having political views and changing the politics in their stories to reflect that, it just felt a little clunky here. Overall a good story though. I also found many of the characters very likable and I thought in particular the main character (David 'N*****' Anderson, yes that N word is the characters nickname and he is referred to as such throughout the book. By the end I started to think of that word as just his name and am now a bit worried I might say it in reference to the book and get frowned upon. Perhaps that is another thing the author is trying to point out. That word only has power because of how we perceive it.) and the priest who is used to intro the book were well written.

Vivian says

[It is hard to write an adequate review without a spoiler...as it finally dawned on me that the author wrote this book in 1951 about events that would not occur until the 1980-1990's??, he did

---

John Defrog says

My experience with Nevil Shute is limited to his post-apocalytic On the Beach, which I read ages ago and remember liking. So when I found this second-hand, I thought I'd try it. The jacket synopsis sounded promising: mysterious old man on his deathbed tells another man his life story which impossibly takes place 30 years in the future (circa 1983). But after about 100 pages I'd had enough. The "future" turns out to be concerned mainly with the political development of England and Australia and their subsequent relationship – and that's it. It's so mundane that if not for the jacket synopsis, at first you'd never know he was talking about future events unless you're fairly well versed in Commonwealth political relations and democratic structures. And even then, you might think he was merely making things up, not talking about the future – it's not until he mentions specific years that you realize something is up. And Shute's fascination with political evolution comes at the expense of everything else – apart from democratic processes, societal norms and technologies seem to be the same in 1983 as they were in 1953. It doesn't help that the old man – who is of mixed-race heritage – deliberately goes by a nickname that's also a racial epithet (ostensibly to throw it in the face of anyone who might have a problem with his racial background, which is interesting, but still, it doesn't translate well in 2017). Other people might get something out of this, but as speculative fiction goes, I found it both tedious and unconvincing.

Graceann says

I did something with this novel that I haven't done since I was in high school - I went to alternate sources for explanation of what I was reading because I got lost. I was reading one story, then suddenly I was reading another, and it took me quite a while to figure out how I'd been transitioned.

This is one of many things that Nevil Shute does for me; he keeps me on my toes and pushes me out of my comfort zone. The novel starts with the rather simple (and, at the outset, rather dull) story of a priest working in Australia, and trying to get to people who need him during the wet season. During the long night of someone's dying, something else begins. He isn't prepared for this, and neither was I. I almost gave up on the story when it was just about the priest and his lonely little experiences, and I'm so glad that I didn't give in to the temptation. I kept saying to myself "this is Shute; there's got to be more to the story." I was right to stick with it.

There's a great deal of Shute's own political outlook here, and one of the characters nicknames himself with the N-word in order to beat the racists to it. The novel as a whole makes for interesting, thought-provoking reading.

Stephen says

this book in some part is slightly dated with some of the language but however in some parts its quite forward thinking as its a mixture of the present 1953 and a story of a man's future story with the political change/system and fast aircraft.

Nancy Oakes says

Very strange book. I would recommend it to people who are interested in reincarnation or who are into looking at books that in the story expressed prophetic (and some not so prophetic) visions of the future.

brief synopsis:

Written in 1952, In the Wet is situated mainly in England but starts out in Australia. The local parish priest goes out to an isolated house to attend to the dying of the local town drunk and ne'er do well named Stevie. (For some reason, the blurb on the bookcover gives his name as Georgie, and I was so dumb I kept waiting for Georgie to appear in the story!). Stevie is being tended by a Chinese man who raises & sells fresh veggies to the locals, and stereotypically he is an opium smoker. The priest & the sister who came with him decide that if Stevie needs the opium to help him with his pain, so be it, so he smokes a few pipefuls while he's dying. The priest himself isn't in such great shape; he gets hit with another round of recurring malaria and is suffering from fever while he sits holding Stevie's hand. So the priest asks Stevie if he has a wife or anyone they can contact & Stevie throws out the name "Rosemary." He begins to tell the priest about Rosemary, and from there comes out the story that is the major thrust of this book -- it is the story of David Anderson who serves in the Royal Australian Air Force as the pilot to the Royal Family. Now you could chalk this up to the fact that Stevie's totally stoned, but the strange part is that Anderson's story takes place in the future, and that a lot of things that Stevie tells just frankly haven't happened at the time in which the novel is set.

So, you could argue that In the Wet is Shute's "prophecies" about England & the entire British Commonwealth. It is also a look at the fate of the Queen and the royal family, almost in an alternate setting -- there have been three wars; England has suffered under thirty years of socialist misrule; mass out-migration by British people to other countries of the Commonwealth, which stand in contrast to the vision of England as flourishing & a prosperous place to be.

I liked this book. I was admittedly a little taken aback and to be honest, a little put off by the use of Anderson's nickname and I think that this factor got in the way of my reading, but then again, the book was written originally in 1952 so I guess I can overlook that. I thought the characterizations were good -- a little stereotypical, but again, probably a product of the times. The story was intriguing & kept me reading.

David says

spoilers follow

In the decades after the Second World War, thousands of British men and women emigrated to 'the colonies'

- usually Australia, South Africa, and Canada - as a way to escape the dreariness of post-war austerity for a whole gamut of reasons. Nevil Shute was one such person. Like some others, he was fleeing his homeland because of concern about the direction the country was going in under the post-war Labour government. What this government did was undoubtedly radical and the rights and wrongs of that administration continue to be debated today. In the interests of full disclosure I am English and I am left wing, and that has definitely affected how I read and enjoyed this book. I make such a disclosure because, for me, this was less a novel than Nevil Shute's own thinly-veiled diatribe about the state of post-war Britain sandwiched in between a much more interesting and better-written tale. The one redeeming feature about the book (for me) was the other tale and also the fact that - in typical Shute fashion - the prose was clear, and very readable.

In the Wet is, largely, a story-within-a-story. It begins with a tale written by a malarial parson in a remote Australian parish. This takes up something like the first 60 or 70 pages of the book and I enjoyed it very much. It reminded me a lot of Beyond the Black Stump (the only other book I have read by Shute), and vividly brought the Australian outback to life for me.

The parson visits a dying alcoholic and, in his final hours, hears the opium-addled man tell him a fantastical story about the future. In this story (which takes up most of the book) the alcoholic is reborn as a different man decades in the future when a constitutional crisis envelops England. The man, a Australian Air Force pilot, becomes part of the Queen's Flight and participates in her saving the Commonwealth by fleeing an evil socialist government in Britain and relocating the centre of the Commonwealth of Nations to Australia, no seriously.

Reading it in 2016, it is clear that In the Wet is a profoundly dated book - giving a book a bad review for that reason, however, is simply lazy - but if you are sensitive to these things prepare for retrogressive gender politics, a saturation N-bombing (the alternate future antagonist adopts the nickname 'Nigger' because of his mixed-race heritage), an obsessive fanatical monarchism and some questionable views on the value of modern democracy. Some of this will be dealt with below, because frankly it has to be if I am going to review this book properly.

At times, the book reads like an immigration pamphlet for Australia, or the smug ramblings of an emigre writing from his sunnier, spacious, new home. In Australia of Shute's alternate future, a place where immigrants are flocking almost faster than new houses can be built, there is opportunity, plenty, good weather, beautiful landscapes and a bizarre system of 'multiple voting' which has led to the election of a 'different type of politician'. By contrast Britain is full of sullen, sallow people suffering immensely under a comically incompetent socialist government led by ex-trade unionists who seem to be totally incapable of any kind of reasonable action or thought process.

Let's leave aside that Shute's Australia was actually founded on dispossession and genocide of indigenous peoples. It was a common trope among settlers in the 'white' Commonwealth to portray their countries as 'better Britains' after the Second World War. In this sense Shute's writing is an excellent example of these discourses of settler superiority. If I was being a particularly accommodating reader, that would be fine - because I understand where it is coming from - but at the same time the constant political exposition is heavy-handed, repetitive, and distracts from what otherwise could be a quite exciting (if totally bonkers) adventure story. In the Wet is a book that would be great to write an essay about, less so to read for pleasure (unless you are a right-wing Australian in which case it is essentially your bible).

One of the central themes to which people are constantly coming back is the failure of one-man, one-vote democracy. I study white settlers in central Africa for my PhD, and so am well-versed in arguments deployed against one-man, one-vote, but was quite stunned (and, frankly, appalled) to hear what Shute had to say

about it in this book. Indeed, the entire meta-narrative is predicated on the idea that certain people 'deserve' privileges over others. In the first instance, the Royal Family of this book is unimpeachable. I am no royalist, but I quite like the Queen. At the same time, I have never heard a convincing argument, nor has a lifetime studying history, proved to me that monarchs (anywhere) innately deserve to rule anyone. Shute seems to either not understand or refuse to accept the concept of a 'constitutional monarchy', something which long pre-dated Britain's post-WW2 woes. He seems to want the Queen to be able to rule with absolute power.

Further to this, at several points clumsy arguments for 'multiple voting' are advanced. In Shute's alternate world, the Commonwealth (i.e. the white bits of it - Canada, Australia, New Zealand) has a system of votes designed to stop the tyranny of the common man being allowed to have a voice. The qualifications speak for themselves:

1. Everyone gets a basic vote
2. People who have been to University get an extra vote
3. Ditto those who have raised two children without getting divorced(!)
4. Ditto those who have spent time outside the country (though the protagonist says this was cheapened as it applied to soldiers who served abroad in world wars)
5. Ditto those who own businesses
6. Ditto those who are clergymen(!)
7. A special seventh vote can be granted as a privilege from the Queen herself

Here is the second bizarre argument for extended privilege. It sure was good of Nevil to ensure everyone got to keep one vote, and while to some the extra qualifications seem reasonable they are based on common assumptions about people's influence and intelligence for which there is no evidence. People who own businesses already get more of a say in government policy because their position as employers and economic movers and shakers gives them alternative routes to government beyond voting - why do they also then deserve another vote? I think in the modern day most people would dismiss giving clergymen extra say because of our secularising society (which is why people want the bishops out of the House of Lords). Raising two children and not getting divorced is not necessarily a sign of stability and responsibility, it could be the product of a loveless inertia or (in Shute's world) two people staying together to get another vote just as some people today marry for a tax break. Certainly more people could do with going abroad and seeing (and understanding) more of the outside world, but even Shute's protagonist claims that his time abroad didn't really grant him any better understanding in this regard so his 'being abroad' vote is purely a result of bureaucratic function (something Shute claims to despise). If the increasingly partisan farce of the honours lists has taught us anything, the 'Seventh vote' certainly wouldn't be awarded to anyone based on a considered examination of their intelligence and responsibility. University is by no means a guarantee of superior political reasoning, and I can tell you that from experience as a student of Oxford University, where among some of the most intelligent people in the world there are a raft of utter idiots. This entire bizarre system is based upon the idea that ordinary people don't know what is good for them and only vote selfishly. No evidence beyond a kind of smug assumption that some people 'know better' is offered to counter this incredibly demeaning picture. The truth is, everyone who exercises the right to vote votes in their own interests. The challenge, and fairness, of democracy comes from trying to balance those interests. Instead of this, Shute's multiple voting encourages a hierarchical system in which some people know best and the rest do what they're told because it is good for them. Shute talks about British democracy as if it is a unique experiment. In reality most of the western world had adopted this system by 1952. If he attributes Britain's post-WW2 decline purely to representative one-man, one-vote democracy, how does he account for the concomitant success of America (using the same system) at the same time? What was the key difference? You don't know, because rather than a cogent argument for electoral reform this is just a novel-length whinge about Labour governments. Shute does point out several times that the 'colonies' pioneered better

voting systems in the past - the secret ballot in Australia and women's votes in New Zealand of which the 'colonials' in the novel are justifiably proud. This is an important point and Shute is certainly right about the British peoples' reluctance to undertake electoral reform (see the recent referendum on proportional voting), but what he is suggesting is less 'reform' and more a retrenchment of certain types of institutionalised privilege (rather than, say, proportional voting, which is eminently fairer). In Shute's system I would be allowed three votes, for the same reason as the main character (travel abroad, university education, and basic) and it would not change the way I currently vote at all. It would simply make me more powerful at the expense of the majority of the population - what is fair, just, honest, or decent about that?

At the end of the book the new Governor-General of England forces Parliament to accept this new system and Parliament has to accede because the people of Britain are so upset that the Monarchy ran away to Australia. This is an alternate future of not quite the same calibre, consistency, or believability envisioned by Orwell. The patently ridiculous nature of what people keep suggesting was another thing that kept pulling me out of the narrative. Just as I thought the point had been sledgehammered home, someone mentioned how the 1867 Reform Act was a terrible mistake, or how a company boss deserved more say in a democracy than his employees.

I might sound to some like a petulant leftie throwing my toys out of the pram, but when Shute has so clearly set out his stall like this I have to deal with the politics of it. This is a profoundly reactionary and conservative work which made for unpleasant reading. I could have set this aside if it was well-written or the argument was cogently presented, but the argument was: "I love the Queen and I think the opinions of people like me are more important than the opinions of the 'common man'". Sorry, I'm not persuaded by that. It would have helped if Shute hadn't been so repetitive and direct about it. The main character is constantly talking in almost eugenic terms about Australians as a people are healthier and superior to British people. An Oxford Don chortles about what a terrible time England has had with a common franchise. A socialist Prime Minister of England (always England, never Britain, despite the fact that the entire government seems to be Welsh) doesn't know the geographical extent of his own empire or the name of the Australian Prime Minister. Come off it Nevil. If you want to convince me to further disenfranchise ordinary people you're going to have to do better than that. The socialist government after WW2 was actually broadly supportive of Britain's imperial mission, and spent huge amounts of money in what scholars call a third wave of imperial expansion in Britain's tropical colonies. Your protests against one-man, one-vote sound like the desperate bawlings of a bitter reactionary who fled the country rather than stay to try and argue a cogent, alternative case, as others did - that postwar Labour government from which Shute scarpered was gone after a single term, then the Conservative party returned to power for another decade in one-man, one-vote elections (see, they work both ways).

As you can probably tell from my review. In the Wet was certainly an interesting book - thanks to my research interests - and an infuriating one - thanks to my political persuasions. It is useful as an object of study for students of settler attitudes to the weakening of the British Empire and responses to post-war austerity. A small part of it is an enjoyable if relatively uneventful novel about life in the Australian outback. Most of it is a thinly-veiled political rant about post-war Britain interweaved with a readable story about aeroplanes - a story that I would have given a higher rating were it not for the repetitive political exposition that all the characters seemed so fond of. When I sat down to write this review I was prepared to give the book two stars, but hovering over that rating I noticed that it stood for 'it was ok', In the Wet was not 'ok', it was highly problematic and I 'did not like it', hence one star. Don't bother with it unless you want to do some literary criticism on settler writing about the end of empire, Shute's other novels are much better.

Vikas Datta says

A magnificent display of imagination and style in the way the narrative switches from the present to the future and returns seamlessly... makes a few key points about British politics and commonwealth relations that seems uncannily prescient but then Mr Shute's storytelling capabilities were never in doubt...

Owen says

Although some of Nevil Shute's work is created using a fairly large canvas (one thinks of "A Town Like Alice," more than any other), most of his novels are simple tales about everyday life. The trick, or real art, which they demonstrate, is in showing us a slice of that ordinary world we think we all know, as though it were the most normal thing in the world, and then bringing out the oddity that is never far below the surface. So "In the Wet," one of his more imaginative novels, takes us bit by bit into the remote parts of tropical northern Australia, building up tiny details from characters and race days and scraps of conversation, until the real story, hidden just below the surface, begins to emerge. Shute, whose background is very much that of an experimental scientist with oil on his hands, is never more impressive than when he leads the unsuspecting reader through the mundane material world that we think we see, onto another plane altogether. Not afraid in the least of exploring spirituality, Shute acts as an intelligent, well-informed guide for the reader on a voyage of discovery. Never intruding on the narrative, yet masterfully keeping it in rein, he is an author whose novels have long been considered merely "popular," when in fact they are often penetrating inquiries into the meaning of life.

One other characteristic of Shute's writing that is perhaps more apparent today than it was in the fifties and sixties is that his work is always set in the contemporary period of a world undergoing vast change. He lived and served and worked through two world wars and the effects of these cataclysmic events were such as to shake up the foundations of the very science which had made so many people feel so secure for a time. Therefore, his texts today also provide interesting excursions into that world, from 1920 to 1960, which was not only metamorphosing into the more colourful world of the Beatles, Vietnam and Tricky Dicky Nixon, but which has since very completely disappeared from the ken of anyone much under fifty. Of course, if all you are after is a good story told by a competent storyteller, you won't be disappointed either.

Jim Puskas says

Every so often, Shute liked to spin one of his favorite "tricks", suddenly shifting from one situation into an entirely different time and place, with his main characters transported in some supernatural or strangely spiritual manner. He did that very skillfully in "An Old Captivity" and "Lonely Road" and again here. As long as the reader is willing to suspend disbelief and just go along for the ride, it can be very effective. In this case, he over-reaches by speculating on a future of his own imagining and the tale is made less appealing because of Shute's decision to color it with his own off-beat political views; the fact that the future evolved in a vastly different manner than he envisioned renders it even less credible when read today. So, this is a book for those who, like myself have a great liking for Shute and his old-fashioned style. Despite those flaws, it's still a compelling story, largely because his main character David is such a likeable fellow. Rock-ribbed socialists and anti-royalists will detest this book. Devotees of Ayn Rand would probably love it

regardless of its weaknesses.

Stuart Mcgrigor says

I read this one ages ago in my mid-teens. It was the first time I read a book where the author had an overt political agenda, and a wheel barrow to push.

Wrapping that all up as a piece of speculative fiction, and the creepy supernatural tie in between the events in the future and the here now, really rang a bell in an impressionable 17yo.

I've always thought this was the best of the 20 odd Shutes, although _On the Beach_, _A Town Like Alice_, and _Requiem for a Wren_ are other favourites.

Jenne says

This was a weird one. Most of the book takes place in 1983 (it was written in '53) but it took me little while to figure that out, since apparently nothing had really changed in 30 years except that airplanes go faster, and England is still under rationing, and Australia has a new political system. (Multiple voting, where you can earn extra votes for various things like education or experience overseas or raising a family)

This is basically what I call a hobbyhorse novel (like the Da Vinci Code or the Celestine Prophecy) where the author has some cool idea they want you to know about so they think up some story to illustrate the idea. (Which in this case is **The Evils of Socialism**, or, **How Australia Is Awesome and The English Are Losers**.)

Still, it's by Nevil Shute, so it's crazy readable and there's lots of stuff about airplanes.
Also, it was timely with all the Queensland flooding lately, because that's what the title refers to.

And finally, just to warn you, the main character's nickname is the n-word, and they use it all. the. time.

M.A. McRae says

'In the Wet' has an unusual plot. It is part set in the Australian Outback, 1950s, and written from the point of view of a Church of England priest. A dying alcoholic tells him a story of his life - except that his life is in the future, maybe a future life. It is a story of involvement in high affairs, when England has become a socialist state, grey and dreary, and her queen finds her life plagued by hostile politicians. She decides that the thriving former colonies might be a better place to live. She is Queen of Canada and Queen of Australia as well as Queen of England, something that is often forgotten.

One thing that Shute talks of that is worthy of some real thought - that the system of one man/one vote will not elect the best politicians, rather it is apt to elect the one who makes the most generous promises. He suggests a multiple vote system - that everyone has the one basic vote, but can earn an extra vote for higher education, another vote for living and earning money overseas for a certain period of time, another for a stable marriage and family, etc. Being a serving officer of the church also earned an extra vote. (this book

was written before the scandals of the church and its coverups of child sexual abuse by its priests.) The queen could also award a vote - 'the seventh vote.'

He has a point about his 'multiple-vote' system - surely a person with some education and intelligence should be able to choose more wisely than a no-hoper who never did anything in his life but get drunk, sire illegitimate children and collect the dole.

There is an author's note at the end. I was impressed by it.
'No man can see into the future, but unless somebody makes a guess from time to time and publishes it to stimulate discussion, it seems to me that we are drifting in the dark, not knowing where we want to go or how to get there.'

So Nevil Shute made a few guesses, and even though little of the world as he imagined it, actually happened, it made for a very good yarn.
