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## Foundations

*January 1899–December 1918*

Nevil Shute, or to give him his full name Nevil Shute Norway, was born in Middlesex at 16 Somerset Road, Ealing on 17 January 1899. He was the second son of Arthur and Mary Norway, with his rather unusual second Christian name coming from his paternal grandmother Georgina Shute, also a prolific author in her day.

Ealing was then on the edge of London, which, as the capital of the British Empire, was in many respects the centre of the world. The colonialist Cecil Rhodes summed up a common attitude of the time when he is reputed to have said: ‘Remember that you are an Englishman, and have consequently won first prize in the lottery of life’.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Queen Victoria’s Empire covered over a quarter of the earth’s land surface. It was the largest and richest in history, and getting bigger. With many of Victoria’s children and grandchildren married into royal families across Europe, Britain’s influence was continuing to spread.

Over a third of the world’s trade went through London’s docks. Key economic commodities such as cotton, wool, wheat and sugar were loaded or unloaded daily in London. Massive private trading companies, such as the East India Company, who had for so long controlled distant parts of the Empire on behalf of the British government, were now being dissolved and replaced by direct imperial rule.

In addition to political and economic power, the British Empire of course also had military might. For an island race this had traditionally manifested itself as naval power, which Britain had in abundance. Although the Royal Navy had a long successful history as the principal defender of the realm, its ships were now becoming dated, and countries such as Germany were already planning modern fleets to rival the British. The Royal Navy also performed an important second duty by ensuring the protection of the all-important sea trade routes. The first manned flight of the Wright brothers, and the beginning of the development of the aeroplane, which would ultimately redefine military capability, was still four years away. For the present, though, Britain still ruled the waves.

Of course, all was not perfect. The British Empire had its fair share of conflicts, especially at the outer fringes. For instance, the year Nevil Norway was born, the second Boer War began in South Africa. Although Queen Victoria had confidently asserted that ‘we are not interested in the possibilities of defeat; they do not exist’, reality turned out to be very different. It would prove a long and expensive war, and take the Empire three years and an army of nearly half a million men to finally reach a somewhat unsatisfactory conclusion against a much smaller opponent. This war, which was considered by many historians to be the ‘last of the gentlemen’s wars’, brutally put into focus the difficulty of supporting an Empire that was spread across the world and the unsuitability of the army and its tactics for such conflicts. It was also a war in which newspaper propaganda was used in a major way for the first time to influence wavering public opinion. In spite of these weaknesses, for many, the British Empire, and in particular London, was still the place to be. It was into this world that Nevil Shute Norway was born.

Coincidentally, at the same time, but on the other side of the globe, the six colonies of Australia were nearing the end of negotiations that would lead to federation and the formation of the Commonwealth of Australia – a country which was also to play an important part in his future life.

Nevil Norway was born into a comfortable, upper-middle-class household that reflected the Victorian values of hard work, respectability, education and a keen interest in the wider world. His father, Arthur Hamilton Norway, was then 39 years old, with good prospects as a

clerk in the Civil Service, having entered the Service via the competitive entrance examination on 6 August 1880. A position in the Civil Service was desirable to many at that time. It provided a permanent, well-paid career with a pension, and at the higher levels, status and recognition in the form of public honours. He was initially appointed as an assistant surveyor of taxes at the Inland Revenue in Liverpool, but in February 1883 he was transferred to the General Post Office and moved to London.

The days of entry to the Civil Service by patronage were over, and the entrance examinations were of university standard, requiring knowledge of a wide range of subjects, including the language and literature of England, France, Germany, Italy, ancient Greece and Rome, mathematics, the natural sciences and history. Although the system was described as open, it was still designed to heavily favour Oxford and Cambridge University graduates with a classics education. Although he was not from this background, Arthur Norway persevered, and with help from Mr Wren, a renowned Civil Service coach, he was ultimately successful in passing the entrance examinations. He clearly had both scholarly ability and a fierce ambition to succeed. In addition to his duties as a clerk in the secretary's office of the General Post Office, by the time Nevil was born, Arthur Norway had already had three books published by a mainstream publisher. These included travel guides of Yorkshire, Devon and Cornwall and a history of the post office packet service. The Victorians had a rapidly growing appetite for literature of all kinds.

Mary Louisa Norway, who had children rather late in life, was 38 when Nevil was born and from a strong military background. Her father, Frederick Gadsden, was then a retired major general from the Indian Staff Corps, who had spent nearly all of his working life in India. Following his retirement, the family had settled down in Ealing, also living in Somerset Road. Mary would have been used to living in different parts of the world, and she would have been well trained in running a household, managing servants and organising social events. Like her husband, she would later become a published author, writing a memoir on her experiences of the Irish Easter Rising in 1916. The young Nevil Norway was indeed fortunate to be in an environment in which both writing and travel, significant factors in his later life, were nurtured.

Nevil had one brother, officially Frederick but always Fred to him. Born three years earlier, Fred's arrival into the world had been proudly

announced by his parents in the London *Times*; Nevil did not receive such an honour.

From an early age, Fred had demonstrated the same love for classical learning as his father, and so, in his parents' eyes at least, he was destined for great things and would be given every opportunity to achieve them. Although Nevil was very different to Fred, more content to build model aeroplanes out of wood and metal, and develop a knowledge of mechanics than studying literature and the classics, the two got on very well. While it would have been quite understandable if Nevil had been jealous of his elder brother, this was never the case and in many respects he idolised Fred. Sadly, like so many of his generation, Fred was to have his life cut short in the trenches in France during the First World War, and Nevil later poignantly wrote 'after nearly forty years it still seems strange to me that I should be older than Fred'.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Ealing was a rural urban town in Middlesex with a population of just over 30,000. Known as the Queen of the Suburbs, the urban district council was working hard to protect its image as a town for the prosperous middle class who worked in London. Somerset Road reflected this ideal, with a row of three-storey detached houses intended for professional families with servants. The Norway family at number 16 was typical of this, in that, like every house in the road, they employed domestic servants to support the smooth running of the household. In fact, at that time, Ealing had a higher number of female domestic servants than any suburb in London except Hampstead and Kensington.

Nevil and Fred therefore spent their pre-school years in a well-managed, secure environment in which they enjoyed the comforts of a modern urban home along with the many distractions of a country environment to stimulate their young imaginations. One of the young Nevil's earliest memories of life in Ealing was 'of seeing a balloon descend voluntarily about a mile to the south-west of Somerset Road'. For this event to be so clearly etched in his memory, and so vividly described in his autobiography over fifty years later, illustrates the fascination that aviation was already beginning to have on him.

As a young boy, Nevil could have best been described as rather plain. With brown hair and brown eyes, and a receding chin that always gave him a

rather sullen look, there was little to make him stand out. The moment he opened his mouth to speak though, things were different – Nevil Norway had a significant stammer. This was an affliction which was to haunt him for the rest of his life and although it would bother him less as he got older it never left him.

As well as the stammer, Norway had to deal with a second problem: he was left-handed. This was something that was considered a social stigma at the time, and children were often punished for being left-handed and forced to write with their right hand at school. It has been suggested that the trauma associated with this may have caused Norway's stammer. However, while such a theory was widely believed up until the 1940s, there is now no medical evidence to support this. While the exact reasons for a stammer are still not clear, it is now recognised as being a neurological condition, rather than being caused by any trauma or shock. Whatever the reason, the stammer was to affect him to various degrees all of his life. There are no known audio recordings of Nevil Norway in existence.

In 1907, Arthur Norway was promoted to the grade of assistant secretary, and he became head of the General Post Office Staff Branch in London. This advancement was celebrated by moving the family to a new house. Still in Ealing, Corfton Road was a step up from Somerset Road, offering larger houses with bigger gardens.

The education of his sons would have been of high importance to Arthur. The expected education pathway for boys from the upper middle classes was preparatory school to be followed by a good English public school and university, preferably Oxford or Cambridge. It was thought by many that only public schools could provide the social, linguistic and sporting skills necessary for advancement in life. They also usually offered lifelong support in the form of the old boys' network. The Civil Service, of which Arthur was a lifelong part, was a great illustration of the importance of a public school education at that time. As late as 1927, 72 per cent of top-ranking civil servants, 80 per cent of the Indian Civil Service and 64 per cent of Dominion governors had been to public boarding schools.

Nevil's formal education began in 1908, at age 9, when he was sent to Colet Court, St Paul's Preparatory School in Hammersmith. He was not conforming to the norm for his social class and attending a boarding

school, but instead still living at home and travelling to school each day on the recently electrified District Railway. Given Nevil's stammer and lack of confidence, it was most likely that his father's intention was that he would go on to the local St Paul's School, one of the few predominantly day schools in the prestigious 'Clarendon nine'. His brother was further along the expected education route and shortly to start as a boarder at one of the others in the Clarendon list: Rugby public school. Nevil's first experience of formal education was not a happy one. His stammer made him stand out, and he became an easy target for unsympathetic fellow pupils and masters alike. Already low on confidence, he became even more self-conscious, later describing that period as becoming 'so intolerable that escape becomes the only possible course'. He managed this by realising that the stop after Hammersmith on his daily journey would take him to the wonders of the Science Museum in South Kensington. He spent ten happy days there, absorbed, trying to understand the operation of the machines that had driven the industrial revolution, and fascinated by technology that would change the world in the future. He was particularly captivated by aeroplanes such as the Bleriot XI that had crossed the English Channel less than a year before. When his parents were alerted that he was not attending school, rather than send their son back to suffer at Hammersmith, they took a more far-sighted and sympathetic approach and sent him to board with friends in Oxford so that he could attend Oxford Preparatory School.

Norway, then 11 years old, joined Oxford Preparatory School (now called the Dragon School) in April 1910. It was colloquially known as Lynam's, after the Lynam family who ran the school at that time. The progressive headmaster, C. C. (Skipper) Lynam, promoted what was perhaps an unusual attitude for the period: the belief that children should enjoy school. The school had an informal ethos built around individual responsibility rather than regimentation. When he first arrived in Oxford, Nevil stayed with the Sturt family, whose head Henry Sturt was an old friend of Arthur Norway, and like Norway, a prolific author. The Sturts had three children, one of whom, Oliver, attended the same school as Nevil. Although Nevil only boarded with the Sturts for a term or two, he left his mark on the household by accidentally kicking the ear off a carved wooden fox which formed part of the central pillar of the family's ornate

dining table. This became part of family history, with subsequent Sturt children often being reminded to not be like Nevil and keep their feet still while seated at the table during supper. The more relaxed atmosphere at school and the fact that he was boarding with an easy-going family allowed Norway to flourish, build his self-confidence, and with encouragement from the family develop a range of water interests such as swimming, boating and fishing which would remain with him for the rest of his life. He also nurtured his interest in mechanics by watching the teachers at school maintain their motorcycles. Motorcycles were still in their infancy, temperamental, and needed constant attention to keep them going.

Some of the Norway family's holidays during these formative years were spent in Trebetherick, Cornwall. Henry Sturt rented Shilla Mill in nearby Polzeath for six weeks or so every summer from about 1900 until 1915, to enable him to write while his children enjoyed the freedom of the rural surroundings. The Sturt and Norway children often found themselves in each other's company during these carefree summers. It is during this period that Nevil Norway also first met the future Poet Laureate, Sir John Betjeman. Although Betjeman was seven years younger than Norway, they shared holiday lessons, probably given by Henry Sturt at Shilla Mill. They would not be in regular contact again until near the end of Nevil's life, when he played a part in arranging a visit for Betjeman to Australia.

Back at Oxford Preparatory School, Nevil did not find his feet academically straight away, in fact finishing bottom of his form at the end of his first term. In truth he was never much of a scholar in the traditional sense, only improving his ranking marginally during his three years at the school. Perhaps much more importantly though, the more relaxed environment in which he now found himself was beginning to have a positive effect on him, and as a result his confidence began to improve. He ultimately won several school prizes for his holiday diaries – perhaps the first signs of a budding author. Just before leaving in April 1913, the boy with a stammer was third servant in a school production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, another sign of his growing self-confidence. Norway continued to stay in contact with the school in later years, writing a number of articles for the school magazine *The Draconian*.

On 17 August 1912 it was announced that, as from 1 October, Arthur Norway was to replace Sir Reginald Egerton as secretary to the Post Office

in Ireland. However, this appointment was not necessarily the enviable one it might have first seemed, for a number of reasons – both personal and political. By 1912, Arthur had been one of the six assistant secretaries in the Post Office for just over four years. Given his age, experience and career progression at that stage, it is probable that he would have eventually been a strong candidate for the position of second secretary in London. While the position title of secretary to the Post Office in Ireland sounded impressive, the appointment in Dublin was in many ways a step to the side, in that it was at the same pay and a slightly lower level in status. However, Arthur was concerned about the health of his wife, who had recently undergone a serious operation, and his son Fred who had had suffered several periods of ill health at Rugby. He believed that a change to a more rural lifestyle would be beneficial to both, and so putting his family before his career he applied for the position in Dublin.

From a political perspective, Dublin in 1912 was part of a bitter crisis. In April of that year, the British prime minister had finally introduced the Third Home Rule Bill, which would give limited self-government to Ireland. Although there was fierce opposition to it among some parties, with the House of Lords no longer having the power to permanently veto a bill, devolved government was expected to become a reality for Ireland sometime during 1914. A part of the Third Home Rule Bill proposed that the Post Office and postal services within Ireland would be the responsibility of the new Irish Executive with revenue going to the Irish parliament, and therefore it was reasonable to expect that the secretary to the General Post Office would in future be an Irish national. Arthur's appointment was therefore intended as an interim one for a period of two years, although in practice it eventually lasted just over four. Arthur Norway described himself as 'a liberal of the imperialist school'. He believed strongly in the British Empire, had a history of setting high standards, expecting absolute loyalty from his staff but in return being just and loyal to them. However, perhaps not surprisingly, at a time when home rule was such a sensitive political issue, the appointment of an English Protestant to such a position was not universally welcomed. For instance, the nationalist *Sinn Féin* weekly described Arthur Norway's appointment as 'an insult to every Irishman in the Post Office'. Members of Dublin County Council were also not impressed by the appointment, especially when told by the postmaster general in London that 'the gentleman (Mr.

Norway) had been appointed for two years, with the view of enabling him to learn the duties of administration'. However, in spite of the controversy surrounding his appointment, in many ways this was to be the peak of Arthur Norway's career.

Along with a move to Dublin, Arthur Norway also needed to find accommodation appropriate to his new position. He leased South Hill House, a large country property set in 13 acres of grounds south of Dublin. Of course, the house and the social occasions associated with Arthur's position needed both domestic staff and gardeners to keep things running, but as a major general's daughter, Mary Norway was well used to dealing with such situations. Although Nevil was still at school in Oxford and Fred was now at Trinity College, Dublin reading classics in preparation for a career in the Consular or Civil Service, when they could be there South Hill offered a whole new range of country pleasures which they took full advantage of. Reflecting on this idyllic period in later years, Nevil Norway wrote of his parents: 'for two years until the first war they led a very happy life at South Hill ... I am glad my parents had that happiness while it was still there to enjoy'.

In May 1913, Nevil started at Shrewsbury School. While his brother Fred, and before that his grandfather Frederick Gadsden, had attended another famous public school, Rugby, for whatever reason, it was decided that Nevil should go to Shrewsbury.

At that time Shrewsbury School was led by the Reverend Cyril Alington, a young, forward-thinking educationalist and prolific author who had revitalised the school by his inspirational leadership and by appointing a number of bright young masters. However, the school day still followed a conventional Victorian/Edwardian public school pattern. A boy's life was completely controlled from waking at 7.15 am until 'lights out' at 10.15 pm, with a solid mixture of study, physical activity and plenty of chapel. Norway joined Oldham's House, whose idiosyncratic housemaster, J. Basil Oldham, not only funded the building of Oldham's House but was at Shrewsbury for the rest of his working life. During his three years at Shrewsbury, Norway did not excel in any of the usual areas and was certainly not seen by his housemaster as a being a luminary of either the house or school. In spite of the fact that Norway had made little impression during his time at Shrewsbury, in the 1950s, when Oldham

was suffering hard times, and Norway was a famous and wealthy novelist, he still remembered his old housemaster. Norway generously opened and funded a bank account for Oldham to be used for holidays and whisky – two pleasures that Oldham could no longer afford. He also made other considerable loans that he did not expect to be repaid, and he paid for the publication of a specialist book on English leather bookbindings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which Oldham had devoted his later years to. In a typically understated view of his own work at the time, Norway observed that he thought it ‘only fit that entertainment books should be bought in to assist more serious scholarship’.

After a somewhat hesitant start, Norway’s time at Shrewsbury can best be described as sound but unspectacular. He ran, swam and rowed for his house, and won a number of minor prizes for academic achievement. His school record shows that he was good at physics and chemistry, but less good at mathematics (surprisingly for a future engineer), and very good at English (good for a future novelist!).

Though he was in the science rather than classics stream, Norway almost certainly cultivated his lifelong love of poetry at Shrewsbury. It was an age in which poetry was more mainstream reading than it is today. Many of the younger masters wrote poetry and boys were encouraged to follow suite. A few years later in 1916, a collection of poetry written by boys in the Fifth Form was published as a gift and tribute to their inspirational English teacher, Evelyn Southwell, who had enlisted to fight in France. He was subsequently killed at the Battle of the Somme. Although Norway was writing poetry by that stage, he himself later admitted that ‘all of it was very bad’, and none of his poems made it into the Fifth Form’s book *VB Shrewsbury*.

At the deadline of midnight Central European Time on 4 August 1914, Britain had not received a response to their demand that Kaiser Wilhelm II respect Belgium’s neutrality and withdraw his troops from the country. As a consequence, war was declared on Germany. The ‘war to end all wars’ had begun, and like millions of other families across the British Empire, the Norways would be permanently scarred by the conflict.