

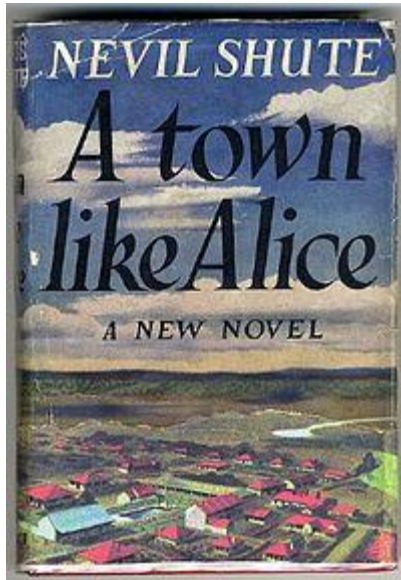
# *A Town Like Alice*

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For other uses, see [A Town Like Alice \(disambiguation\)](#).

## *A Town Like Alice*



1st edition cover

|                         |                                     |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Author(s)</b>        | <a href="#">Nevil Shute</a>         |
| <b>Country</b>          | <a href="#">England</a>             |
| <b>Language</b>         | <a href="#">English</a>             |
| <b>Genre(s)</b>         | War, Romance                        |
| <b>Publisher</b>        | <a href="#">Heinemann</a>           |
| <b>Publication date</b> | 1950                                |
| <b>Media type</b>       | Print ( <a href="#">Softcover</a> ) |
| <b>Pages</b>            | 359 pp                              |

*A Town Like Alice* ([U.S.](#) title: *The Legacy*) is a novel by the British author [Nevil Shute](#) about a young Englishwoman in [Malaya](#) during [World War II](#) and in outback Australia post-war.

Written from the perspective of her Scottish solicitor and trustee, it tells the story of her time as a prisoner of war in Malaya, and her post-war life in a small outback community in [Australia](#), which she sets out to turn into 'a town like Alice', [Alice Springs](#) in the [Northern Territory](#) of Australia.

It was first published in 1950 when Shute had newly settled in Australia.

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## [\[edit\]](#) Plot summary

The story falls broadly into three parts.

In Post-World War II London, Jean Paget, a [secretary](#) in a [shoe](#) factory, is informed by [solicitor](#) Noel Strachan that she has a vast inheritance from an uncle she never knew. But the solicitor is now her trustee and she only has the use of the income until she inherits absolutely several years in the future. In the firm's interest, but increasingly for his own personal interest, Strachan acts as her guide and advisor. Jean decides that her priority is to build a [well](#) in a Malayan village.

The second part of the story flashes back to Jean's experiences during the war, when she was working in [Malaya](#) at the time the [Japanese invaded](#) and was taken prisoner together with a group of women and children.

As she speaks Malay fluently, Jean takes a leading role in the group of prisoners. The Japanese refuse all responsibility for the group and march them from one village to another. Many of them, unused to physical labour, die. Jean meets a young [Australian](#) soldier, Sergeant Joe Harman, also a prisoner, who is driving a truck for the Japanese and they strike up a friendship. He steals [food](#) and [medicines](#) to help them. Jean is carrying a toddler, whose mother has died, and this leads Harman to believe that she is married; to avoid complications, Jean does not correct this assumption.

The thefts are investigated and Harman takes the blame to save Jean and the rest of the group. He is crucified, beaten and left to die by the Japanese soldiers. The women are marched away, believing that he is dead.

When their sole Japanese guard dies, the women become part of a Malayan village community. They live and work there for three years, until the war ends and they are repatriated.

Now a wealthy woman (at least on paper), Jean decides she wants to build a well for the village so that the women will not have to walk so far to collect water: "A gift by women, for women".

Strachan arranges for her to travel to Malaya, where she goes back to the village and persuades the headman to allow her to build the well. While it is being built, she discovers that by a strange chance, Joe Harman survived his punishment and returned to Australia. She decides to travel on to Australia to find him. On her travels, she visits the town of [Alice Springs](#), where Joe lived before the war, and is much impressed with the quality of life there. She then travels to the (fictional) primitive town of Willstown in the [Queensland outback](#), where Joe has become manager of a cattle station. She soon discovers that the quality of life in 'Alice' is an anomaly, and life for a woman in the outback is elsewhere very rugged. Willstown is described as 'a fair cow'.

Meanwhile, Joe has learnt that Jean survived the war and that she was never married. He has travelled to London to find her, using money won in a [lottery](#). It is some time before they are reunited in Australia and the attraction between them is immediately rekindled.

While staying in Willstown awaiting Joe's return, Jean learns that most young girls have to leave the town to find work in the bigger cities. Having worked with a firm in England that produced crocodile leather luxury goods, she gets the idea of founding a local workshop to make shoes from the skins of crocodiles hunted in the outback. With the help of Joe and of Noel Strachan, who procures money from Jean's inheritance, she starts the workshop, followed by a string of other businesses; an icecream parlour, a public swimming pool and shops.

The third part of the book shows how Jean's entrepreneurship gives a decisive economic impact to develop Willstown into "a town like Alice"; also Jean's help in rescuing an injured stockman, which breaks down many local barriers.

The story closes a few years later, with an aged Noel Strachan visiting Willstown to see what has been done with the money he has given Jean to invest. He reveals that the money which Jean inherited was originally made in an Australian gold rush, and he is satisfied to see the money returning to site of its making.

Jean and Joe name their second son Noel, and ask Strachan to be his godfather. They invite Noel to make his home with them in Australia, but he declines the invitation and returns to England.

## [\[edit\]](#) Characters

- Jean Paget - a young Englishwoman who is a prisoner of war in Malaya and later finds love and settles in the Australian outback.
- Joe Harman - an Australian cattleman who is a prisoner of war in Malaya; he survives crucifixion and gets back to Australia.
- Noel Strachan - the narrator; he is Jean Paget's solicitor and trustee.

## [\[edit\]](#) Themes

The protagonists share the attitudes of the time: [Aborigines](#) are referred to as "[boongs](#)" or "[abos](#)". It is also assumed that non-whites must use different shops and bars from whites and that they are less reliable than whites. But these attitudes are often presented not in a racist, but an ironic sense: for example, the captive British women are completely lost, because the only Malayan words they have learned are orders for their Malayan servants, while Jean survives by use of her language skills and her willingness to live the Malayan way.

Another theme is the situation of women in Western and Asian society at that period. For example, Jean Paget is not given full control of the money she inherited from her uncle, but has her capital managed by male lawyers. Also the Malayan women are subject to their husbands. Jean Paget makes a move toward female emancipation by digging a well in a Malayan village, so that the women of this village no longer have to carry their water for two miles each day, and also have a meeting place next to the well where they can discuss village affairs without being heard by the male villagers. However, this must be done with the approval of the men.

A third theme is that of [entrepreneurship](#), and especially the role that entrepreneurs may play in [community building](#). Instead of living on the income from her inheritance, Jean Paget puts it to good use to make Willstown a better place. A fourth and allegorical theme is the gift and resurrection of the crucified Christ.

## [\[edit\]](#) Historical accuracy

Jean Paget was based on Carry Geysel (Mrs J. G. Geysel-Vonck) whom Shute met while visiting [Sumatra](#) in 1949.<sup>[1][2]</sup> Geysel had been one of a group of about 80 [Dutch](#) civilians taken prisoner by Japanese forces at [Padang](#), in the [Dutch East Indies](#) in 1942. Shute's understanding was that the women were forced to march around Sumatra for two-and-a-half years, covering 1,900 kilometres (1,200 mi), with fewer than 30 people surviving the march. However, the Nevil Shute foundation insists that this was a misunderstanding, and that the women were merely transported from prison camp to prison camp by the Japanese. "Shute, fortunately misinformed about parts of her experience, mistakenly understands that the women were made to walk. This was possibly the luckiest misunderstanding of his life..." says the Foundation.<sup>[3]</sup>

Shute based the character of Harman on [Herbert James "Ringer" Edwards](#), an Australian veteran of the Malayan campaign, whom Shute met in 1948 at a [station](#) (ranch) in Queensland.<sup>[4][5]</sup> Edwards had been [crucified](#) for 63 hours by Japanese soldiers on the [Burma Railway](#). He had later escaped execution a second time, when his "[last meal](#)" of chicken and beer could not be obtained. [Crucifixion](#) (or *Haritsuke*) was a form of punishment or torture that the Japanese sometimes used against prisoners during the war.

The fictional "Willstown" is reportedly based on [Burketown, Queensland](#) and [Normanton, Queensland](#), which Shute also visited in 1948.<sup>[6]</sup> ([Burke and Wills](#) were well-known explorers of Australia.)

In a note to the text, Shute makes it known to the reader that a forced march of women by the Japanese did indeed take place during World War II, but the women in question were Dutch, not British, and the march was in Sumatra, not Malaya.

## [[edit](#)] Critiques and rankings

In 1998, the [Modern Library](#) ranked the novel seventeenth on The Reader's List of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century.<sup>[7]</sup>

## [[edit](#)] Adaptations

### [[edit](#)] Cinema

The novel was adapted to [film](#) in [1956](#) as *[A Town Like Alice](#)*. It starred [Virginia McKenna](#) and [Peter Finch](#), directed by [Jack Lee](#). This film was known as *Rape of Malaya* in U.S. cinemas, and by various other titles in non-English-speaking countries.

### [[edit](#)] Television

In 1981 it was adapted into a popular television [miniseries](#) called *[A Town Like Alice](#)*, starring [Helen Morse](#) and [Bryan Brown](#) (with [Gordon Jackson](#) as Noel Strachan). It was broadcast internationally, in the United States it was shown as part of the [PBS](#) series *[Masterpiece Theatre](#)*.

### [[edit](#)] Radio

In 1997 a six part radio version of "*[A Town Like Alice](#)*" was broadcast on BBC Radio 2 starring [Jason Connery](#), [Becky Hindley](#), [Virginia McKenna](#) and [Bernard Hepton](#). It was dramatised by [Moya O'Shea](#), produced by Tracey Neale and David Blount and directed by David Blount. It won a [Sony Award](#) in 1998.

## [[edit](#)] See also



[Novels portal](#)

- [Margaret Dryburgh](#) - an English missionary held captive by the Japanese in World War II
- [Paradise Road](#) - a film based on the female prisoners of war in Sumatra in World War II

## [[edit](#)] References

- ↑ "["Too Good to Be True"](#) (*Time*, 12 June 1950) Access date 6 June 2007.
- ↑ [Special Broadcasting Service, 2005 "She was Nevil Shute's inspiration for a Town Like Alice"](#) Access date 6 June 2007.
- ↑ [Nevil Shute Foundation](#) Access date 3 October 2009.
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- ↑ [Roger Bourke, 2001–2002, "'Cultural depth-charges': Traditional meaning and prisoner-of-war fiction"](#) Access date 6 June 2007.
- ↑ [Nevil Shute Norway Foundation, \*Ibid\*.](#)
- ↑ [The Modern Library | 100 Best | Novels](#)

## [\[edit\]](#) External links

- *A Town Like Alice (1981)* at the [Internet Movie Database](#)

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### Novels by [Nevil Shute](#)

- *[Stephen Morris](#)* and *Pilotage* (1923)
- *[Marazan](#)* (1926)
- *[So Disdained](#)* (1928)
- *[Lonely Road](#)* (1932)
- *[Ruined City](#)* (1938)
- *[What Happened to the Corbetts](#)* (1939)
- *[An Old Captivity](#)* (1940)
- *[Landfall: A Channel Story](#)* (1940)
- *[Pied Piper](#)* (1942)
- *[Most Secret](#)* (1945)
- *[Pastoral](#)* (1944)
- *[Vinland the Good](#)* (1946)
- *[The Chequer Board](#)* (1947)
- *[No Highway](#)* (1948)
- ***A Town Like Alice*** (1950)
- *[Round the Bend](#)* (1951)
- *[The Far Country](#)* (1952)
- *[In the Wet](#)* (1953)
- *[Slide Rule: Autobiography of an Engineer](#)* (1954)
- *[Requiem for a Wren](#)* (1955)
- *[Beyond the Black Stump](#)* (1956)
- *[On the Beach](#)* (1957)
- *[The Rainbow and the Rose](#)* (1958)
- *[Trustee from the Toolroom](#)* (1960)
- *[The Seafarers](#)* (2000)

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