
I left for Canterbury on Tuesday morning after having lectured at the I.T.H. for two hours; these lectures had been so exciting (at least for me!) that I was still shivering when the train was well beyond Utrecht. Thanks to elaborate safety measures I was not hijacked, not bombed at either Heathrow, nor at West London Air Terminal nor at Victoria Station. On that trip I had my only unpleasant surprise when I arrived at Canterbury station and discovered that, contrary to what had been suggested by mail, no one was there to pick me up, while taxis were absent as well. Some one---as it turned out, he was from the University---knew how to get a taxi: around the corner of the station, there was an anonymous wooden box attached to the wall that could be opened and contained a telephone for which you had to pick up the receiver and turn the handles.... I guess that it was the kind of equipment that frightened my grandfather.

The I.U.C.C. Computer Science Colloquium was primarily intended for younger staff members of university computation centres. Besides them the audience contained a certain number of as a rule also young--staff members from computing science departments and people from a number of polytechnics. Its purpose was to upgrade them by providing a forum; the Colloquium was not devoted to a particular theme. The number of older participants was very small (Wilkes from Cambridge, Rogers from Bristol, Michaelson from Edinburgh, Gilles from Glasgow and a few others, on a total of 300 participants).

I was one of the three invited speakers and started the colloquium on Wednesday morning. On Thursday morning Sumner from Manchester spoke in that capacity, on Friday morning captain Grace M. Hopper. (On the schedule she was still announced as "commander" but she had been promoted to captain on I think the 15th of August.) Captain Hopper spoke officially about "Programming Languages"; here real subject was how she had acted as midwife to COBOL and she talked more about the Pentagon and the U.S. Navy than about programming. She did so for seven quarters of an hour, it was sometimes funny and I have been told that but for one new joke it was the same talk that she had given in York earlier this year. It was very illuminating; it gives a sheltered academic mind as mine some glimpses into the organization of power and the power of organization. Sumner spoke officially about the mutual influence between hardware and software design. Perhaps he thought he did in fact as well. He gave --and in view of the youth and limited knowledge and experience of the average participant this may have been a very good thing--a clear expose of the problems caused by unpredictable flow of control in pipelined machines, when you wish to keep the flow at maximum density. But the amazing thing was that he considered "jump instructions" as a kind of unpleasant surprises in the machine code string. The way he talked about "programming" struck me old-fashioned; in Manchester they lead a very isolated life, I am afraid. He could have profited perhaps at this Colloquium from the exposure to others, were it not for the fact that he arrived just before he had to speak and he left immediately afterwards. (So did Grace Hopper as well.) Narrow minded and pragmatic are the best terms, I am afraid, in which to describe the Manchester spiritual climate. It is a pity and it is even somewhat frightening.

I gave a talk on the influence of correctness concerns on the process of program composition and I stuck to my title (this in contrast to my Newcastle performance a few weeks earlier). Maurice Wilkes did not like my talk at all and said so in private. He felt that I had been "extremely formalistic" and that I had paid too much attention to technical details in the development of my small examples. I was quite depressed when he
told me all this: I thought that I had done a good job --in view of my
recent experiences in the USA I had done it slowly, for I don't like to
lose an audience-- and usually people find me too abstract (that was the
complaint last spring, when I spoke to the staff members of the THE Department
of Mathematics.). Thanks to the fact that I stayed another two days I have
left the colloquium with quite another impression of how my talk went down:
at least with a considerable fraction of the audience extremely well. Many
youngsters have come to me to thank me and to tell me, how delighted they
had been, because now they knew what was meant by proving things about
programs etc. I had the opportunity to speak about another hour with Wilkes
and he is clearly from a different cultural background. Very pragmatic and
grown up in a period where insufficiency of the available theories was
rather rule than exception.

I have not attended all other presentations: there have been parallel
sessions (a little bit) and sometimes I played truant, talking with someone
else outside the lecture theatre. What was presented was not inspiring;
again very pragmatic. Sampling under control of the real time clock values
of the instruction counter during program execution and translating these
values back into "source code text places" in order to get an idea of where
the computer spent its time while executing FORTRAN programs and then using
this information for tuning of programs was one of the best examples! Many
were worse. In particular the "projects" assigned to students (or groups
of students) were very depressing. We must bear in mind, however, that
in view of the fact that the colloquium was organized by an organization
of computation centre directors, what was presented may perhaps not be
regarded as characteristic of British Computing Science today.(Although I
have some fears.....)

On the evening of the first full day we had as guest speaker Dr.S.H.
Mandil from the IBM UK Scientific Centre, Paterlee on "Trends in data
Base Technology". It was an unexpectedly good talk in the sense that it
hardly contained any IBMerses. (Well, he was an old pupil of Tony Hoare!)
He gave three "models", a hierarchical one, one with chains and one with
relations. IMXMMXMMX What, in doing so, he demonstrated most clearly was
the insufficiency of the current way of talking and thinking about data
bases. Basically it was still the fuzzy jargon of the commercial world,
only cleaned up slightly. It is terrible to see people struggling with
problems, attacking them in a way that cannot be adequate. And I am afraid
that that was the case here as well. Mandil was refreshing compared with
the others: he was not purely pragmatic and he did an honest effort to
find some applicable theory that for instance could be used to clean up
some of the adhocery. Also he, however, made upon me a rather isolated
impression.

In general, I would have expected (and justified) more isolation in
industrial research units than in academic research units. Universities do
have some sort of tradition in communicating: it is even part of their
business. But again, perhaps I am naive: most of the academic groups,
even those engaged in the educational side of the business, struck me
as isolated. And usually this has not a good effect: inbreeding, "nei-
invented-here" or just a cluster of incompetence, protected by ignorance.

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