

To Cambridge by mistake (13-18 April 1999)

Of course it did not help that, when I left on Tuesday afternoon, I was upset and rather depressed. In the morning I had listened to a faculty candidate, and that had been a pretty awful experience. You see, a few years ago graduate students believed that the use of LATEX was enough to write a scientific article; these days faculty candidates seem to think that they can give a scientific lecture provided they have played enough with Powerpoint. That morning the visual noise had been exceptionally confusing; the majority, however, did not seem to mind or to notice, and that had been distressing. Until Chicago I have been pondering about this society's systematic refusal to analyse the adequacy of its chosen means of expression, and these were sad thoughts.

The occasion was "EDSAC 99", a celebration of the fact that 50 years ago - well: 6th May 1949 - the EDSAC (= Electronic Delay Storage Automatic Computer) executed its first programme. Since the EDSAC was the first stored-programme computer to do so, this was something to commemorate. [This first programme printed a table of squares. The next day, 7th May 1949, this program still

works, but the effort to print a table of primes fails: "programme incorrect" mentions the log book.] I was invited in my capacity of alumnus of the programming course that Wilkes, Wheeler and Gill gave in September 1951, and since those few weeks changed my life, I decided to attend.

My reasons for taking that decision were not very strong. It was some sort of symbolic act of gratitude, of the trio Wilkes-Wheeler-Gill, the last one had died a long time ago but I felt that this might be the last occasion to meet the other two together, and, finally, it could have been a consideration that with my retirement approaching, this could be about my last opportunity "to walk around", something I have hardly done during the 15 years my endowment enabled me to do so. With nice weather Cambridge is, of course, quite a pleasant place to visit, but apart from that I was not particularly looking forward to my visit: I expected very few friends to show up and with blank paper and things to be studied I prepared myself for a relatively lonely visit. It turned out to be a good thing that I had done so.

I travelled with American Airlines via Chicago.

The flight to Chicago was 25 minutes late and both dishes they served I had to reject because they contained cheese. Despite the late arrival I caught my Chicago connection. On the second flight I got dehydrated as immediately after the meal I fell asleep, and slept almost until arrival at Heathrow.

On British soil the misery started. It was a pure accident that I found the coach to Cambridge, the address of the Holiday Inn was a well-guarded secret so that I could not find the hotel on the little map the Computing Lab had sent me. The official address of the Lab is New Museums Site (the map only mentioned "Museums") at Pembroke Street (not mentioned on the map) but the Lab should be entered via Corn Exchange Street (not mentioned on the map either). Having found the complex, I needed another 45 minutes to locate Beth Want, the secretary responsible for the organisation of the event. The only information she could give me was a list of participants (no more than title, first name and last name, and that often incomplete). Not being given any clue where to find other participants - she could not tell me if others shared my hotel - I returned to my room, had a modest meal and went to bed.

The festivities started next morning at 11:00 in the foyer of the Charles Babbage Theatre. Because it was bitterly cold, everybody came with a coat, but there were hardly hooks to hang them on. (Later I heard that they could have rented hall-stands, but that the insurance would have been too expensive.) They had made no name tags! Later glue-on labels were provided, but most participants did not use them. Consequently I hardly succeeded in meeting people whose name I knew - say Larry Paulson - but whom I had never met. I said "Hello" to David Wheeler and to Maurice Wilkes not even that: when I approached him, somebody else drew his attention and he turned away. Not wanting to risk creating an embarrassment, I did not repeat the effort. (In the mean time I had learned from Peter Wegner that he had attended the previous evening a dinner party at Wilkes's home, a reunion I had evidently not been invited to.)

In the afternoon we were addressed. After an impeccable introduction by Robin Milner (the current Director), there was a very nice talk by Maurice on the earliest year, giving credit where credit was due and delivered with great charm. Then David

Wheeler on EDSAC 2, and you could not think of a greater contrast: David seemed completely uninterested. I always thought that a major advantage of microprogramming was that a larger fraction of the design could be justified by discrete reasoning, but David only mentioned the simplification of the production process. After a break of 30 minutes a video of interviews with Computer Laboratory Engineers, a talk on Titan by Roger Needham, whose diction still causes me problems, and David Hartley, who had to read his text a fraction too fast for comfort. (All the speakers displayed an admirable timing discipline!) After a reception in the University Combination Room we had a dinner in St. John's College Hall that was not worth the \$56 I had paid for it, but this is no reason for regret for I had it in the pleasant company of A.S. Douglas and his wife.

The next morning we had talks from 9:00 to 12:30. Dr. Frank King was, I think, the most sparkling speaker, Ian Leslie, clear, compact, and to the point, was also a pleasure to listen to. Michael Gordon made his points and was okay, the other speakers - some horrendous - will remain anonymous.

The whole affair was a bit self-congratulatory and nostalgic, but that was okay. I was, however, a bit disturbed by an undertone of complaint about a lack of recognition for all the Great Things the Cambridge Computing Laboratory had done since EDSAC 1. Everybody knows that it is not simple to live with a spectacular success in your past, and if the completion of EDSAC 1 represented the Laboratory's finest moment, that was nothing to be ashamed of. (We had come to celebrate that completion, hadn't we?) They confronted us, however, with what struck me as an exaggeration of the significance of later achievements. (They were even praised for how well they had copied MIT!) I also sensed traces of envy. I hope it is better now under its new director Robin Milner, for the laboratory does not seem to have always been a happy place.

Early Friday afternoon we were finished. I would have preferred to fly back on Saturday but that would have made my airline ticket so ridiculously expensive that I have "earned" money for the University by staying a day longer in England. I went to Dillons where I bought two autobiographies, one by Sir Georg Solti and one

by Katharine Graham (both printed and bound in Great Britain). By the time I got home I had almost finished Solti.

Friday night I stayed in Cambridge, Saturday I went to Heathrow where I stayed in the International Hilton Hotel, a very modern, beautiful building in which you don't hear the planes. At 5 o'clock in the morning I did hear someone else's alarm clock; I did not sleep anymore, and that was a good thing. In the evening I had not succeeded in setting via the telephone my wake-up call (though I had faithfully followed all instructions), so I went to the reception where a lady said "We can do it for you", disappeared for 30 seconds and returned saying "Done!". But the next morning I did not get my wake-up call! They do not have their act together.

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