Trip report E.W.Dijkstra, Liege, Nov.-Dec.1979.

This was not one trip, but five short ones: a one-day trip on Thursday 22 November 1979, and a two-day trip each of the four succeeding weeks. All trips were made in connection with the newly installed "Chaire Internationale d'Informatique", sponsored by IBM Belgium under the auspices of the FNRS (Fondation Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique). Professors A.Danthine and D.Ribbens of the University of Liege had taken care of the organization of such a chair for this academic year at the University of Liege. Their chosen topic was "The Correctness Problem in Computer Science", the chair being occupied by five people in succession, in order Edsger W.Dijkstra (Burroughs/ THE), Robert S.Boyer (SRI International), J Strother Moore (SRI International), R.M.Burstall (University of Edinburgh), and Zohar Manna (Weizmann Institute/ Stanford University). Each speaker is expected to occupy the chair for 4 successive weeks. Being the first to occupy the chair, I was also invited to deliver the inaugural address. (I have tried --see EWD720-- to do that also a little bit on behalf of my successors.)

The planning for the opening session was absolutely fantastic. From 15.00 to 16.30 three Belgian speakers, then a short break --in order to allow the Walloon officials, who are not supposed to understand English, to leave the room-- and then I until 17.30; then cocktails offered by IBM Belgium. Listening for two-and-a-half hour is, of course, much more than you can inflict upon an audience, and I was greatly relieved to hear that one of the Belgian speakers had been prevented from attending. Eventually two Belgians spoke from 15.00 to 15.45, the break was skipped, yours truly spoke from 15.45 to 16.30 and the cocktails were served one hour earlier than originally planned.

The first speaker was professor E.Betz, the current Rector of the University of Liege. He is a medical man and delivered a long concatenation of official phrases as if he had been paid to do so (what, in fact, he was). If his description of the role of computing science was correct, then it is quite clear that at the University of Liege computing science has not emerged yet as a coherent scientific discipline with a right of existence of its own. It was all very "interdisciplinary".

The second speaker, C.A.de Meyer, President of IBM Belgium, spoke on the relations between IBM and the Universities. It was quite revealing that, in his title, IBM was mentioned first and the Universities last. The whole talk was very revealing, probably much more so than C.A.de Meyer had intended. He displayed a lot of the penetration tactics: select among the still respectable countries one of the more vulnerable ones --no indigenous computer industry, etc.-- and attack the universities with the usualy bribery of partly free machines and research fellowships to be spent at one of the IBM labs. It is hard to ascertain to what extent the brainwashing had worked. Several people warned me that IBM Belgium was a most dangerous organization, and on account of what I observed I was willing to believe that: I was rather amazed that de Meyer could tell this story and could present IBM as the great patron of Belgian computer science without being shouted down from the podium. I got independent confirmation that de Meyer's way of presenting the situation --viz. that the best thing the Belgians could do was to follow all the U.S. guidance so lavishly offered to them-- was, in general, accepted. Several people asked me during the cocktail party since when I was back in Nuenen, whether I liked living in Europe again, etc. They were utterly amazed when I told them that I had been a Dutch resident all my life: that I could have become the kind of famous expert I evidently was without having learned the trade in the USA was simply beyond them.

<div align="center">*   *   *</div>

During the next four weeks I occupied the "Chaire Internationale d'Informatique". In doing so I lectured for 32 hours. I left Eindhoven on Wednesday morning with the train of 7.55 and returned on Thursday evening at 18.30, having lectured both days from 10.00 - 12.00 and from 14.00 - 16.00 . The four nights in between I stayed in the Holiday Inn which I cannot recommend.

I started with an audience slightly over 100, I ended upt with 70 people, about 30 of whom were students from liege who, in a way, had no choice. Of the reamining 40 I can think of about 7 people that had caught the message and were duly thrilled. Not a bad score, in particular not a bad one when we take into account that those 7 youngsters had almost all

teaching responsibilities at different Belgian Universities. The comment I heard from most of them was "What a pity that so-and-so isn't here!", where so-and-so referred to one of their colleagues or, more often, one of their professors. (It sounded very familiar: "What a pity my boss isn't here" was the overwhelming reaction of my Australian audience.) In a way I pity those youngsters. They form the bright young generation that takes the intellectual challenge seriously, but have to do so in a society in which the older generation hasn't the foggiest notion of what software is about --if not actually full of "fear and hatred of science" (E.T.Bell)-- . One of the participants --with a degree in mathematics-- complained bitterly --and to my taste fully justified-- about the impossibility for Belgian students of mathematics to specialize in informatics. Apparently Belgian computing science is entirely in the hands of engineering and applied science.

And as it is mostly the Department of Electrical Engineering that has absorbed the subject, Belgian computing science is in very bad shape, and, in view of the difficulty of changing academic institutions, it is not clear at all how it will dig itself out of the hole again. In my inaugural address (EWD720) I had not hesitated --though a guest of the "Institut d'Electricite-- to state that "as a rule departments of electronic engineering actually deprive their graduates from the ability to understand later in life what computing science is all about". To the uninitiated this may seem a bold statement --to those living in a stratified society it may even seem a rude one-- , it was, in actual fact, a very safe remark. After I had made it, one of my hosts announced that he would answer it when introducing me next week. He did not, and my reaction was "Well, he postpones that rebuttal for his closing speech". But he did not do that either: in the meantime it was too clear that even the design of a simple program was beyond him. I pity the 7 youngsters: I know the kind of battle they have to fight, they have my blessing (I am afraid that they need yours as well).

In one respect the course was not the success its organizers had hoped: though the course had been well-advertized in France, in Germany, and in the Netherlands, the audience was almost completely Belgian. In retrospect I am slightly annoyed by the absence of many of my countrymen, who could have

learned so much. In contrast, the enthusiasm of the Belgians was heartwarming: one of them, who had his sabbatical in England, commuted from Cambridge.

<p align="center">*   *   *</p>

From a social point of view, my hosts were perfect. All the transport in Liege --between station, campus, hotels, restaurants. etc.-- were taken good care of, and we had a number of pleasant dinners. The dinner in Prof. Ribbens's home was a memorable one, so was the official dinner in the castle on the campus. The interior of this old building has been completely "redone", so as to make it suitable for housing academic receptions etc., and it had been redone very tastefully: we were all impressed. At that dinner we were 11 people; the discussion, though lively, never gave me the impression of being among scholars, but the food was excellent.

Plataanstraat 5   9th January 1980
5671 AL   NUENEN   prof.dr.Edsger W.Dijkstra
The Netherlands   Burroughs Research Fellow

Note. Foreigners will not receive EWD724, which has been written in Dutch.
(End of Note.)