

Trip report E.W.Dijkstra, Oxford University, 10 - 15 Jan. 1979.

With shining sun we left Nuenen at 9.15, when my wife took me to the Eindhoven railway station. When I left the train in Utrecht at 10.30 to take the coach to Schiphol Airport, it started snowing while I was waiting for the next bus --I had just missed my connection-- . By the time I reached the airport --11.50, that is-- it was very foggy and snowing. When I came at the gate I saw to my great relief that the plane was already there. I was told that we would depart 20 minutes late because the plane had to wait for its turn in the de-icing procedure; in the meantime it had snowed so heavily that first the runway had to be cleaned. Then it was not certain whether we would depart at all as the snow had turned into a gale of force 10 . For quite a while it was grim, but eventually, at 15.00, we took off and at 15.00 (English time) we landed at Heathrow Airport. After waiting for 20 minutes for the staircase to arrive, we were told that the car underneath it had broken down; another 10 minutes later it arrived, pushed by four KLM employees. When I was through customs etc. I was told that due to the strikes there were no taxis and I tried to go to Oxford by British Rail, i.e. by coach to Reading Station, and from there by train to Oxford. At the airport I lost my way to the bus stop by following the given instructions literally.... After close to 10 hours of travel I had reached Balliol College, Oxford; after having noticed that the porter was expecting me I felt much better. I phoned professor Tony Hoare in order to inform him that I had arrived, he came and picked me up, and in his home, during supper, I recovered.

The reason for my visit was a Workshop on Distributed Processing, to be held the next two days at Wolfson College, Oxford, under the auspices of the Science Research Council; it was a workshop at which I was the only scheduled speaker.

The workshop was disappointing in a few minor ways. First, I had expected the opportunity to address my audience for two full days, but the next day the sessions started only at 10.30 --"So much more convenient for the people from London, you know."-- ; well, that hurt. Second, the organizer, knowing my allergy for overhead projectors, had not provided such a piece of

equipment, but had also failed to provide decent blackboards! I had two micro-blackboards, not too well supported by shaky easels. I have learned not to expect decent equipment when I have to perform in plants or hotels, but was utterly unprepared for the circumstance that this would be inflicted upon me on a University Campus. It did not take me more than a minute to decide that, for lack of blackboard space, I would not try to serve what otherwise would have been a main course of the meal. (It took me more minutes to redesign the menu.) Third --but that, thank heavens, only dawned upon me when I was half-way-- the audience, about 30 people, had a much lower degree of competence than I had been led to expect. (For this the organizer should not be blamed: too many invited bosses had sent one or two of their ignorant subordinates.) The saving grace of my audience was that, though ignorant, it was very bright. It improved one of my arguments, and during the presentation of one of the topics that I had never presented before, I got a very clear indication where my draft has to be rewritten before it is ready to be submitted for publication. When it was all over I had a beer (in a pub that was noisier than we had intended) with Dent (from Burroughs) and Kessels and Martin (from Philips). When Kessels asked me "Are you depressed?", I denied "No, only empty.", but in retrospect I think that I lied a little bit to him: I was a little sad and still am.

The next two days I was the private guest of Tony Hoare and that, of course, was a great pleasure: for 48 hours I joined their family life --with the exception of a skating errand: in my youth I have skated enough for a life-time-- , Joe Stoy, who had just returned from a conference at Oberwolfach, dropped in with his wife, and Tony and I talked with each other. On Saturday afternoon Tony gave me a very instructive lecture, on Monday morning I trust he learned something from me. (I at least learned something from my own explanation after breakfast.) At 10.45 the arrival of the taxi that would take me to Heathrow interrupted us.

I left Britain half a day before the next stage of its civil war --this time in the form of a railway strike-- would hit it. My KLM flight back to Amsterdam was dead on time. By way of experiment I tried to use the newly established railway connection from Schiphol to Amsterdam-Zuid, because I

feared that it would be no good. It was no good. It is a splendid connection for arriving passengers with Amsterdam-Zuid as their final destination, for anybody else it is just a waste of time --in my case even a cold waste of time-- .

Kessels and Martin, who had left Britain two days earlier, had experienced an almost three-hour delay at Heathrow Airport for what the rest of the world does not acknowledge as a valid reason. Will "industrial dispute" become Britain's euphemism of the year?

17 January 1979

Plataanstraat 5
5671 AL NUENEN
The Netherlands

prof.dr.Edsger W.Dijkstra
Burroughs Research Fellow