

DAVID LINK

There Must Be an Angel On the Beginnings of the Arithmetics of Rays

From August 1953 to May 1954 strange love-letters appeared on the notice board of Manchester University's Computer Department:¹

“DARLING SWEETHEART

YOU ARE MY AVID FELLOW FEELING. MY AFFECTION CURIOUSLY CLINGS TO YOUR PASSIONATE WISH. MY LIKING YEARNS FOR YOUR HEART. YOU ARE MY WISTFUL SYMPATHY: MY TENDER LIKING.

YOURS BEAUTIFULLY

M. U. C.”²

The acronym “M.U.C.” stood for “Manchester University Computer”, the earliest electronic, programmable, and universal calculating machine; the fully functional prototype was completed in June 1948.³ One of the very first software developers, Christopher Strachey (1916–1975), had used the built-in random generator of the Ferranti Mark I, the first industrially produced computer of this kind, to generate texts that are intended to express and arouse emotions. The

1 T. William Olle, personal communication, 21 February 2006: “I do remember a copy of the Strachey love-letter being put on the notice board and that must have been after August 1953 and probably prior to May 1954 (the date of Alan Turing's death).”

2 Christopher Strachey, The “thinking” machine. *Encounter: Literature, Arts, Politics* 13 (1954): 25–31, p. 26.

3 Frederic C. Williams and Tom Kilburn, Electronic digital computers. *Nature* 162 (1948): 487. By “computing” and “calculating” I mean here and in the following in general the processing of data. Various machines are claimed to be the “first” computer, but all others lack one of the properties mentioned. The “ABC”, developed by John V. Atanasoff and Clifford Berry 1937–1941 in the U.S.A., was a binary digital “equation solver” and remained unfinished due to World War II. intervening. From 1938, in Berlin Konrad Zuse constructed a series of electro-mechanical binary digital equation solvers, culminating in 1941 in the functioning model “Z3”. Both projects included a certain internal memory for numbers but not for instructions. The same applies to “COLOSSUS”, completed in the U.K. in December 1943, and the North American “ENIAC” of November 1945. On both machines the instructions were plugged via cables. See Simon Lavington, *Early British Computers* (Manchester, 1980), p. 4ff. Lavington offers an easy and readable account of the early history of computers in Great Britain.