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The Early Days of the AISB

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Abstract. Let me ask you, what do you know about the The Society for the Study of Artificial Intelligence and Simulation of Behaviour (AISB)? You may know that we are celebrating the society's 60th anniversary and hence that it was founded in 1964. You may also know that it is a member of EurAI, that it publishes the AISBQ, and that it organises an annual convention. You may also know that one Eduardo Alonso, who, incidentally, is by no means a professional historian, acted as vice-chair of the AISB between 2003 and 2006. Well, maybe not.

To provide the reader a broader view, in this short paper I am giving a quick account of the first years of the AISB, that is, of the period during which, paradoxically, the AISB was not the AISB strictly speaking.

1 The origins

In October the 26th 1964, after a one-day "Symposium on Artificial Intelligence and Simulation of Behaviour" Max Clowes writes to the British Computer Society (B.C.S.) to form a Study Group –with two main objectives, namely, to arrange meetings, and to edit and circulate a Newsletter (Figure 1). It receives a favourable response from the B.C.S. the 20th of November. The symposium itself was held in September 1964 at the Northampton College of Advanced Technology (C.A.T.), later to become City University, at Northampton Square, London, and organized, most likely, by Robin Milner. The discovery of this fact came as a surprise to the author of this note since he has been working at City University, now City St George's, University of London, since 2001.

The AISB is established as the "British Computer Society Study Group on Artificial Intelligence and Simulation of Behaviour". The AISB as we know it, a learned society independent of the B.C.S., will be established in 1974 (see later).

In its foundational document, an AISB steering committee is appointed, consisting of Donald Broadbent, Irving John Good, Donald Michie, Christopher Strachey and Max Clowes, secretary and "dogsbody". Max Clowes will later serve as first Chair between 1969 and 1972, followed by Bernard Meltzer (1972–1976).

To give the reader some perspective, the A.C.M. SIGART was founded in 1966, and the IJCAI corporation in 1969; the AAAI dates from 1979, and ECCAI from 1982. Thus, the AISB is, in fact, the eldest AI society in the world.

Within the U.K., Michie's Experimental Programming Unit was established in 1965, before becoming the Department of Machine Intelligence and Perception in 1966 (joined by H. Christopher Longuet-Higgins' Theoretical Section and Richard Gregory's Bionics Re-

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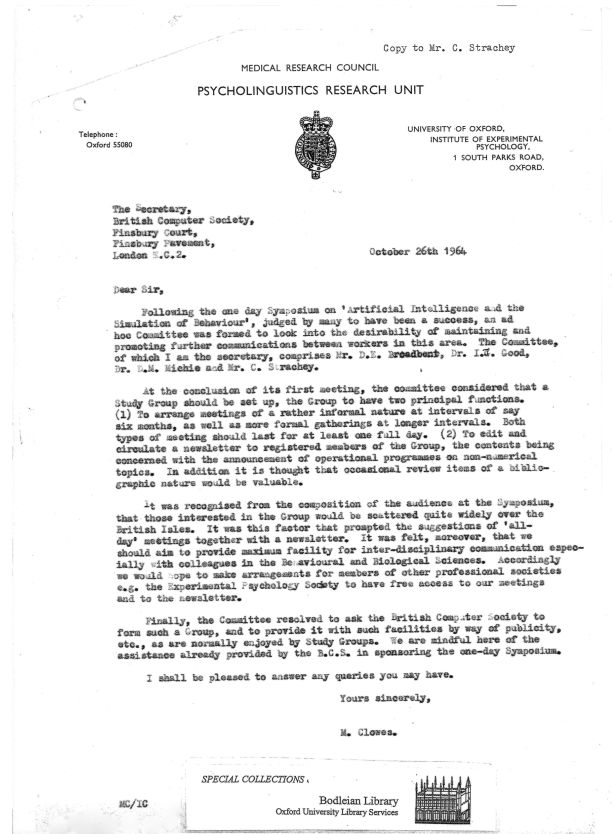
Figure 1. Letter to the British Computer Science to support the formation of the AISB Study Group.

search Laboratory); the famous "Machine Intelligence Workshop" series were inaugurated in September 1965; and in the same year, a diploma course in Machine Intelligence Studies (with 5 students) was first delivered. Research-wise, this is the time of MENACE, Graph Traverser, POP-1, and FREDDY I.

In a more mundane tone, we were still using pre-decimal currency in the U.K., shillings and denarii. According to the opening balance of the "A is B", as the society was mockingly coined by Max Clowes, the original contribution of the B.C.S. was £10 and the subscription 10/- -.

The relationship between the AISB and the B.C.S. was an uneasy one from the very beginning. In a letter from Rod Burstall to C. Strachey dated November 1966, on the occasion of organising the 1967 AISB meeting at the Atlas Computer Laboratory, Chilton, we read

that "the B.C.S. regard symposia as fund-raising affairs (...). They have been charging admission fees of 5-7 guineas (...)"; Strachey's reply reflects clearly the society's dissatisfaction with this state of affairs: "I find the B.C.S. attitude quite deplorable. Their function should surely be to encourage the development of specialist groups, not to try to make money from them. (...) I should be in favour of severing all connection with them. (...)".

From the first Membership List (60 members, May 1st 1965) we learn that AISB research was not exclusively focused in Edinburgh, as one is sometimes led to believe; and that there was a genuine interest in bringing together researchers from different academic areas and also from industry (Elliott Brothers, IBM), the Government (the Ministry of Aviation, the Middle East Command), the Bank of England, the BBC ... Special mention goes to psychology: it was not a coincidence that two out of the five members of the original AISB steering committee, D. Broadbent and M. Clowes, were psychologists, as there were other heavyweights such as Nicholas Mackintosh; that members of the Experimental Psychology Society ""should have free access to our meetings and to the newsletter"; and that the Medical Research Council were actively involved in the society's activities during the 60s. Somehow, this changed over the years, with the AISB becoming more AI and less SB.

2 The Quarterly

It is precisely the Quarterly what better defines the AISB and the best source of information about these first days of the society. So, it is worth examining its trajectory: The Quarterly starts as the "AISB Newsletter" edited by, who else, Max Clowes; from Issue 3, April 1966, Rod Burstall and Jim Doran take over; and under Pat Hayes' editorship it becomes "the European AISB Newsletter" in July 1969; then it is briefly transformed into the "Bulletin" between November 1972 and February 1973, with E.W. Elcock and A. Ortony. Their editorial strategy was not welcomed: in a letter to the Cttee., Feb 22 1973, they propose a "good solution" to the editors' difficulties, "to amalgamate with its sister –SIGART Newsletter". Clowes' answer settles the issue "(...) the Elcock-Ortony proposal is appalling. With less that 12 months of taking on the (admittedly difficult) task of editing the Newsletter they want to throw it into SIGARTs lap. I protest strongly." As a consequence, we are back to the European Newsletter, Issue 14, July 1973, this time with Alan Bundy and M. Liardet as editors (Figure 2); and, eventually, the Quarterly sees the light of day, in October 1977 Issue 28, with Tim O'Shea (and a team of subeditors including B. Welham, R. Young and G. Plotkin, and, later, C. Mellish and L. Daniel). At some point, there was a debate about handing production and distribution of the Quarterly to professional publishers (North-Holland) in 1978-79, that is, about becoming an appendix to the AI Journal, but the suggestion did not prosper.

Speaking of which, it is good to remember that the AISB was instrumental in launching "Artificial Intelligence", published by Elsevier and sponsored by A.C.M. SIGART. It is not a coincidence that B. Meltzer was proposed as the first Editor-in-Chief, or that Tony Cohn, AISB chair between 1992 and 1994, acted as such in 2007-2014.

3 The Convention

As for meetings, there were plenty: one-day scientific meetings, with invited speakers from "Machine Intelligence" workshops, one-day specialised meetings (in chess, theorem proving, robotics, ...), and summer schools, typically hold in London (I.C.L., Q.M.C., C.A.T.),
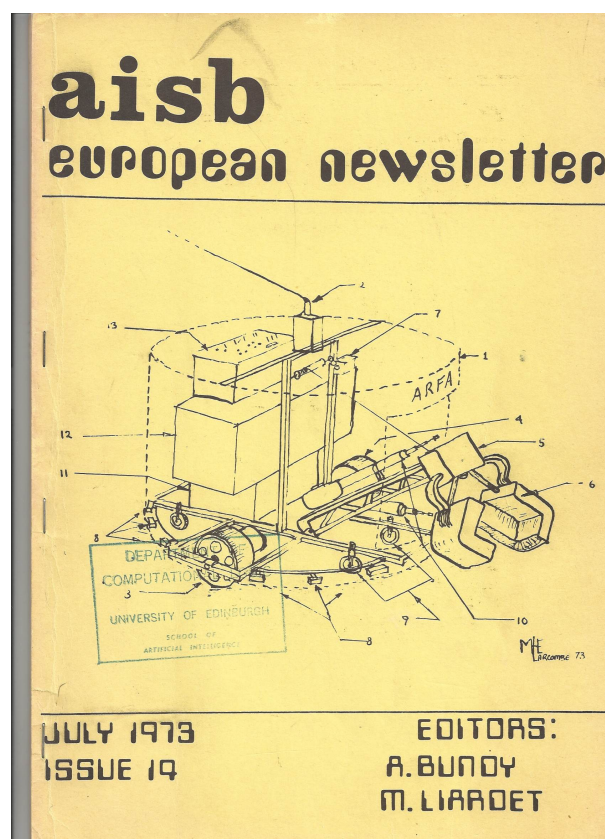

Figure 2. AisB's European attempt, 1973.

or "around" the Home Counties (Oxford, the Atlas Computer Laboratory, Sessex, ...). And, of course, the first conference, organised in Brighton 1974 by Keith Oatley and Margaret Boden, followed by Edinburgh 76, Hamburg 78, and Amsterdam 1980, which were in fact European. The founding ECAI, Orsay 82, preceded the split of the society (see later), and of the conferences, with the AISB convention and ECAI alternating years from Exeter 83 and Pisa 84, except in 1996 (Sussex and Budapest respectively); a joint conference in Brighton 1998 was followed by the final separation.

The relation between the AISB and Europe can be traced back to 1969: Newsletter's Issue 8 informs that during the first IJCAI "a special meeting for the European delegates" was held, resulting in Erik Sandewall reporting that the "British" AISB Newsletter becomes the "European Newsletter for Artificial Intelligence and Simulation of Behaviour", to be produced by Uppsala University, distributed from Edinburgh, and edited by Pat Hayes: "It seems likely that for a while at least we will function as a kind of European AisB, until other national groups are formed on the continent"; ... until means 1982, when the European Coordinating Committee for Artificial Intelligence (ECCAI, now EurAI) is founded with the AISB as a member.

4 AISB three main characteristics

Browsing through the first newsletter/quarterly issues one finds three recurrent themes that, to a certain extent, define the AISB even today, namely,

- Money (lack of): ToC Issue 9, November 1969, puts it rather explicitly: "MONEY *** IMPORTANT ***"; as it does J. Doran's letter to B. Meltzer, 18 Jan 73: "There is about – £5 in the kitty now";

- Believe it or not, (lack of) contributions to the Quarterly: 22nd April 69 letter from Pat Hayes to AISB members reads "(...) only one contribution had been sent to the editor (...)";
- Tongue-in-cheek attitude: One of my favourite examples is M. Liardet and A. Bundy's Report on the AISB Scientific Meeting January 5th 1974, "(...) was badly hit by the power crisis and the railway worker's dispute (...) but the numbers were boosted to about 30 by Edinburgh workers. The meeting took place in a cold lecture theatre on a cold wet Saturday. Hopes of some relief over lunch were dashed when we arrived in an even colder refectory to face an (airline type) salad. (...)", closely followed by a hilarious advertisement: "ATTRACTIVE SCOTTISH ACADEMIC enjoys affluent life-style – fast cars, expensive holidays, excellent software environments, beautiful Georgian flat, etc. Highly successful, tenured, respectable publications (AI Journal, Cognitive Science, etc.), large grant-holder. Into Szechuan cooking, Baroque music, Linton Kwesi Johnson, jogging, backpacking, and wholefoods. Seeks sincere, object-oriented woman for discreet, loving relationship and mutual simulation. Send 1024 x 1024 pixel image in RT-11 format. Box-MC68000" (Issue 39, Dec 1980). These pranks were accompanied by sections like Brady's cryptic crossword, Aguirre's Wyno the Learning Computer cartoons, limericks, a section of Silly Acronyms (e.g., PROLOG: PRObably the Language Of God), and, of course, the contributions of Father (Alesyus) Hacker, whose identity is one of the best kept AI secrets since Bletchley Park –all the author can say is that, by July 1979, the list included Benedict du Boulay, Alan Bundy, Chris Miller, Hal Abelson, Gordon Plotkin, and Tim O'Shea. So rumour has it.

5 The AI Winter and the AISB

Back to historical facts, from early 1972 D. Michie promotes the idea of a learned society, and in a letter dated 26th Jan 73 M. Clowes confides his fears to B. Meltzer "I feel that the long term view of the AISB is hanging by a thread (...)". It must have been clear by then that the "Lighthill Report", eventually published in 1973 for the Science Research Council (the S.R.C., akin to today's UKRI) was not going to be complementary. And indeed it was not. Sir Michael James Lighthill's "Artificial Intelligence: A General Survey" [1] was followed by the famous BBC debate "The General Purpose Robot is a Mirage" and many comments –by N.S. Sutherland, H.C. Longuet-Higgins, D. Michie, R. M. Needham ... and John McCarthy. Yet, in the author's humble opinion, the best reflection appeared in the AISB European Newsletter July 1973 Issue 14: "Serendipity Resources Council, The Darkvale Report on Applied Mathematics, A Cardboard Conference" by Sir Gorgam Darkvale, F.R.S. Caucasian Professor of Divinity, University of Grantabury, and Pat Hayes' "Some Comments on Sir James Lighthill's Report on Artificial Intelligence". Their reading should be mandatory in any AI course.

As an aside, R. Needham's role in this affair is perplexing: In October 1982, he and P. Swinnerton-Dyer enthusiastically supported the S.E.R.C. (the then Science and Engineering Research Council, today's EPSRC) Alvey Programme in a pamphlet, "Artificial Intelligence Research in the UK", that argues that Lighthill was right then, in 1973, but that he would have been wrong in 1982. To make it up for, a new brand is all it was needed: Intelligent Knowledge Based Systems, IKBS, is born.

Nevertheless, despite accepted wisdom, the AI winter seems to have been rather mild: in 1972, the S.R.C. Long Range Computing Policy Panel recommended the creation of at least one more major

centre of Machine Intelligence; Meltzer's "S.R.C. policy with respect to senior appointments on research grants in universities", April 4th 1973, was adopted by the council; the S.R.C. set up a standing Artificial Intelligence Panel in 1974; in 1974-75 the first AI courses are launched in Edinburgh and Sussex, as well as a cognitive studies programme in Sussex; the S.R.C. promotes the creation of a computing network between Edinburgh, Manchester, A.C.L. and the S.R.C. Rutherford Laboratory in July 1976; S.R.C. Interactive Computing Facilities Committee sets up a special interest group to provide advice on software requirements for AI in July 1977 (with A. Sloman (Chair), R. Burdstall, A. Bundy, M. Brady, A. Smith and P. Kent); S.R.C. grants are still awarded to Edinburgh staff, including Michie ... Perhaps the best example that the crisis was not as severe as first feared is the fact that the AISB survives: the first conference takes place, there is a steady growth in membership numbers, the newsletter is published regularly, and, importantly, it becomes a learned society.

6 The AISB proper

Minutes of the Cttee meeting 11 April 1973 report that: "Donald Michie expressed that, in his view, the essentials of such a society were that: – i. It possessed a formal constitution, ii. It was therefore subject to democratic safeguards eg rotation of committee membership, iii. Membership was not automatic – a minimal requirement was that a candidate must be proposed by an existing member, iv. It existed as a legal entity, not merely as a group of individuals. Donald Michie argued that if the Study Group were reformed in this way it would be taken more seriously by the outside world and by its own members." ACTION: Meltzer and Michie to prepare a draft constitution.
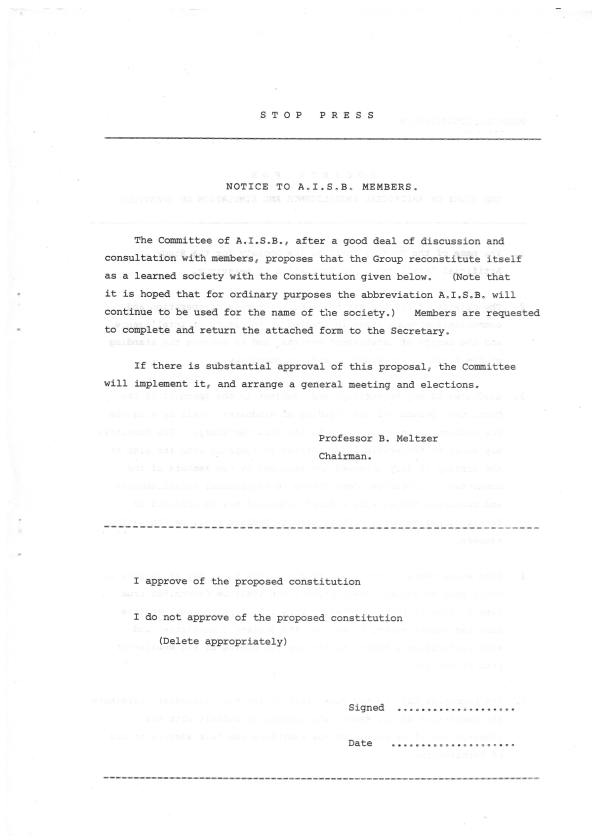
Events followed: the Constitution is proposed in Issue 17, July 1974 (Figure 3); and approved (with only one nay) in October 1974 (then revised in 1977 for charitable status).

7 Europe and all that

Shortly after becoming the AISB, a problem arises: "the issue is whether we work towards separate national "AISB"s (...) or a single continental organisation. Current political theory calls for the latter, sited in Brussels, with a bureaucracy of around one thousand!", from M. Brady's chairman message Nov 76. Jörg Siekmann (then in Essex) had reported on "German Intelligence Becomes Artificial" in November 74, and by 1977 the German AI Study Group had grown strong, with their own Newsletter and increasing governmental funding. In July 1977 there are mixed signals: "The European AISB Newsletter" becomes the (not explicitly European) "AISB Quarterly" ... and announces that the next AISB Summer Conference will be held in Hamburg.

Then, Wolfgang Bibel from IFI Munich circulates a proposal for the creation of the EAAI, Oct 79, arguing that "most people (...) regard it (the AISB) as a British society", and proposing a board with two representatives from Britain and one from each of France, Germany, Italy, Benelux, Scandinavian and Eastern Europe.

Pat Hayes, among others, is against it: "I can't support this idea. I strongly believe (...) would be a disastrous mistake. I also think that your (Bibel's) motivation in wishing to set it up reflects priorities and views on science and nationalities which are wrong (...) There is no room for a second organization, the entire European AI production is smaller than Stanford's (...) EAAI is going to directly compete with AISB". Facts though are stubborn things:

References

[1] J. Lighthill. Artificial intelligence: a general survey. In *Artificial Intelligence: A Paper Symposium*, pages 1–21. London: SRC, 1973.

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                      NOTICE TO A.I.S.B. MEMBERS.


            The Committee of A.I.S.B., after a good deal of discussion and
        consultation with members, proposes that the Group reconstitute itself
        as a learned society with the Constitution given below.   (Note that
        it is hoped that for ordinary purposes the abbreviation A.I.S.B. will
        continue to be used for the name of the society.)   Members are requested
        to complete and return the attached form to the Secretary.

            If there is substantial approval of this proposal, the Committee
        will implement it, and arrange a general meeting and elections.


                                    Professor B. Meltzer
                                    Chairman.


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          I approve of the proposed constitution

          I do not approve of the proposed constitution

             (Delete appropriately)



                               Signed  ...................

                               Date    ...................


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Figure 3. Democracy in action, *the* AISB.

- Fog had not cut off the Continent: AI groups in Europe had proliferated in the 70s;
- Although there is no mention of Britishness in the AISB Constitution, there is little involvement of continentals in the Cttee: E. Sandewall serves from 1969 to 1975, then he is not nominated in first ballot;
- It is acknowledged that currency is an issue for "foreigners in joining AISB" (Sept 78);
- The Hamburg conference is a huge success, boosting confidence of continental members.

And "Europe" was not the only problem: "AISB disciplines" started to form their own societies, e.g., the British Robot Association (by Larcombe, 1977); in the late 70s Donald Michie himself founds the B.C.S. Special Group on Expert Systems –to become BCS-SGAI in June 1980; psychologists feel alienated and join the new Cognitive Science Society in 1979.

It was a brave new world.

Acknowledgements