

A letter from America

by Paul Willis
President, MTA-Europe

For many years the radio presenter, Alistair Cook, sought to explain the great events taking place in America to listeners of the BBC in the form of "A letter from America." On this occasion, a different sort of letter from America may be of assistance in allowing us to see ourselves from a different viewpoint.

In January 1998, an article was published in the MTA-U.K. newsletter under the title of *Fog in the Channel—Continent Cut Off!!* As the author I find it interesting to compare my own, highly subjective, impressions of the MTA-E annual meeting with those of a guest from far away. Tom Walsh, a surprise visitor [from America] to the MTA-E annual meeting, was good enough to provide us with his own perspective and I have taken the liberty of mixing his text with my own.

Paul Willis: On October 28 and 29, 1997, the 22nd Annual Meeting of the MTA-E took place in the Palace Hotel Brussels.

For two days it seemed just like old times—by which I do not mean Barcelona, but more like Bruges and Brighton. Gone were the flashy shell stands [exhibit booths] with their bored and embittered looking salesmen. ("Oh how will I ever justify the cost? When will these Mumpsters ever buy something?!") Gone too was any pretense that this was anything other than what it was, a chance for M users to get together and talk dirty. In fact the whole affair was very enjoyable and laid-back indeed.

Tom Walsh: Let me begin with a very sincere thank you to the membership of the MTA-E for the warm welcome you extended me at your annual meeting. The accommodations, food and particularly the beer combined to make the conference a very enjoyable experience. Four hundred beers, so little time! And the lamb! I had no idea.

I really didn't know what to expect of the meeting either. Having attended the Boston MTA North America earlier this year, I was concerned about the state of M in the world. The well-attended, interesting and educational

MUG meetings of the seventies and eighties had deteriorated into a slightly paranoid gathering of niche players bemoaning their fate. Hoping to discover the state-of-the-M art in Europe, I was pleasantly surprised. There was an enthusiasm and sense of camaraderie long missing in America. A group of professionals, eager to face the challenges ahead, seemed to be intent on enjoying each other's company. It was a great feeling.

I am obviously an outsider. I don't know the history of the discussions leading up to this year's MTA-E. The shortened schedule may have been the product of consensus. It seems to me that the best use of the annual meeting is to share and publish. Perhaps an additional day would allow members, not just to meet socially but also professionally, to get to know the work being done at other sites.

Paul Willis: Following on from the meeting in Calais, December 1996, this meeting was arranged on a very low-key basis, so far as logistics was concerned. However, the itinerary still started with a sumptuous formal dinner in the hotel on Tuesday evening (and finished with an illicit drinking session for the die-hards on Wednesday night). In between times there was a full program of technical sessions arranged by George James of George James Software—who else? Of course the exhibition stands were there—discretely arranged in a side room. But these were of the tabletop variety with an emphasis on exhibition and presence, not sales. In fact some tables were there purely for the purpose of showing off with nothing to sell at all (well mine was anyway). Others acted as a focal point so that one might, possibly, find that illusive "... salesman. In any case the room was always full and bubbling.

The big change from Calais was in the method of cooperation with the implementers. In previous years the MTA-E had been responsible for all planning and logistics. This made sense when we had 10 to 20 active vendors and implementers—"enough said." "At Calais we were looking for a small, but beautifully put together,

show, the sort of thing that would arrange itself," said Bob Rothstein, Executive Secretary MTA-E. The trouble was that one day is too short a time for many to justify a trip across Europe, though come they did. Our solution to this was to ask the implementers to arrange their own sessions in the Palace Hotel the day before ours. This seems to have been a tremendous success with Micronet-ics and InterSystems, both cramped for space (>50 each) and vowing to get bigger rooms next year so that they could invite larger numbers.

Tom Walsh: Vendor performance was another story. When a group feels cornered and besieged on all sides, there is a tendency to become ideologically dogmatic, to choose sides with others similarly disposed and to turn inward. The Roman legions had a tortoise configuration in which they stood shoulder to shoulder, with their shields held over their heads and their spears pointed outward. Perhaps I overreacted to the color-coded vendor teams clustering together at meals and breaks, but their inability to get out the word of their pre-meeting sessions speaks volumes.

Paul Willis: At the formal meeting there was more good news. The MTA-E is financially viable again. This happy outcome is due almost entirely to the changes that we have made in our administrative arrangements, with Datika now providing a voluntary secretariat and Bob Rothstein putting in the free time.

Another change agreed to was a total move to the "net," with all publishing and membership matters being primarily handled through that medium. Our address is www.mta-europe.org. Alternatively you can contact Bob or me at: brothstein@compuserve.com or pnw@cds-systems.co.uk.

Lastly we all said a warm thank you to Wolfgang Kirsten. Wolfgang has been the editor of the *M Professional* for many years but decided to retire from the board at the end of last year. Many of you know Wolfgang, and I hope join with me in thanking him again for all the years of hard work that he has contributed.

So was it a success? That is for those other than me to say. I certainly enjoyed it and found the opportunity to discuss topical issues very valuable. Moreover the membership seemed to feel the same way and I can report, suppressing my overdeveloped sense of natural modesty, that the board was noisily thanked by the membership for organizing the whole affair. Finally, the implementers seemed to get a buzz from the venue and plans are afoot to build on the new formula with smaller vendors adding

a day so that they might also get your attention. This would once again give us a three-day meeting.

Tom Walsh: A three-day meeting, with two days of programs and tutorials and two social events, would allow members more time for face-to-face interaction. I would have liked a little more time to hear what people are doing. As I said before, MTA-E's role is to share and publish. Maybe if we can't spare the time at the meeting, the publishing role could be performed by the Website or *M Professional* focusing more on brief success stories or member profiles. Readers who see an application of interest to them could follow up directly.

I have heard for the last twenty years that M is at a critical point in its history, so I won't repeat that cliché. But at this juncture, we must pull together and get the story out. Let's not waste time arguing inside our M shell.

Paul Willis: Any possible downsides? Well there was that fog in the channel. Maybe we will see a few more from the U.K. in Brussels next year?

So, "Do great minds think alike?" or do Tom and I belong to that other crowd who seldom differ. Well, either way I found it gratifying that on a number of points we picked out the same issues, and it gives me more confidence to build for this year's event.

With regard to Tom's more general points, I remain hopeful that the MTA, in all its manifestations, will continue to have a role to play in the success story of M. Tom is right that we all need to work together. The implementers do not have a choice in the matter—for them it's success or death—but having created the tools, there is little more that they can do. The people I get nervous about are the ones who do not seem to understand that in the end it is the applications that matter. The MTA can help people feel good about the technology, and the implementers can promote it in the press, but from where we are today it is the users and VARs that will decide the future. So get on with it! **M**

Paul N. Willis is President, MTA-Europe.
