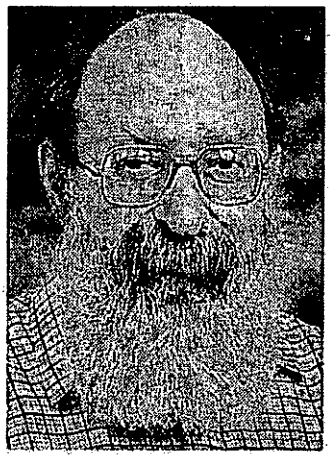
Professor Sidney Michaelson

DURING HIS long career in computer science, Sidney Michaelson was an inspiration to countless colleagues and students. At Imperial College, London, he and K.D. Tocher built one of the world's first stored-program digital computers, incorporating many of the features such as that of microprogramming which are commonplace in today's computers. But his natural modesty led to this work being largely unrecognised.

After a number of productive years pursuing the use of computers in numerical analysis, Michaelson was invited in 1963 to establish a Computer Unit at Edinburgh University. This later became the Computer Science Department and he was given the Chair of Computer Science in 1966. His attention then turned to the development of systems software for computers. His vision of polymorphic computer systems was many years ahead of the available technology and has only recently been achieved in full with the development of networks of workstations. Nevertheless, he and H. Whitfield initiated a significant research activity jointly with English Electric Computers to develop a multi-user operating system, common now but breaking new ground then. This system, EMAS, remains in use within Edinburgh University after an unprecedented 20 years of use. Much to Michaelson's regret, the system will soon be superseded by an all-pervasive American system.

In the Eighties, the development of integrated circuit technology enabled him to rekindle his interest in computer hardware. Following a highly successful initial conference in 1981 for which he was the organising chairman, he formed a new working group of the International Federation for Information Processing (IFIP)



concerned with VLSI, the science of very large-scale integration. This has subsequently developed into one of IFIP's most active groups, regularly organising workshops and conferences. Sadly, he will not see the fulfilment of his planning for "VLSI 91", the tenth anniversary conference.

Michaelson's last passion was that of stylistic analysis of literary texts. With Andrew Morton, he used computers to analyse disputed authorships and chronologies of both literary works and modern criminal "confessions". Their superficially simple methods of counting occurrences of syntactic features have survived scholarly attack and provide convincing evidence for the propositions they put forward.

Michaelson's ability to attract outstanding research workers led to his department's growing into one of the foremost computer science departments in Britain, with consistently high ratings in both research and teaching. It is now widely recognised as the leading centre of study in the theoretical aspects of computer science.

Michaelson was a considerable polymath with a breadth and depth of knowledge and experience that sometimes surprised even his closest colleagues. On any topic, from computer science and mathematics through architecture, opera and the arts to the DIY repair of a vintage Rolls-Royce, he was a fund of wisdom and anecdotes. Outside the academic world, he was an inveterate traveller, particularly to Eastern Europe, where he had many friends. His Morris Minor could be seen most summers setting out on intrepid continental journeys through France, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia or wherever the fancy took him and his wife, Kitty. They knew that they would always receive warm welcome wherever they went.

I accompanied Sid Michaelson on many foreign trips, including a memorable lecture tour around China in 1985, during which he did his best to encourage the Chinese academics to pursue the rapid development of information technology there as a means of accelerating the redevelopment of that country after its Cultural Revolution. His love of children and young people was amply demonstrated in his amusement at Chinese infants' mistaking him for Karl Marx.

The abiding memory of him that his colleagues and friends will keep will above all be that of kindness. His and Kitty's door was open to generations of students who could always walk in and find a shoulder to cry on.

D. J. Rees

Sidney Michaelson, computer scientist, born London 5 December 1925, Lecturer in Mathematics Imperial College London 1949-63, Director Computer Unit Edinburgh University 1963-66, Professor of Computer Science 1966-91, FRSE 1969, FRSA 1979, died Edinburgh 21 February 1991.