This picture appeared on the front cover of ‘Punch’ magazine 11th May 1966. As the title suggests a man is working late at the office. His hands are poised over the keyboard. His eyes are closed, perhaps in concentration or the lateness of the hour and he is captured in the glare of the intense light from a blue angle-poised lamp. Paperwork in wooden trays surrounds him. The in-tray to his left is stacked high above his keyboard. An empty coffee cup to his right is evidence of his attempts to keep awake and finish the job. Lights from many similar offices in the surrounding tower blocks can be seen through the large window immediately behind him. Stars appear in the night sky and a constellation (possibly and symbolically the Plough) pierces the gathering gloom. On closer inspection, the multicoloured skyscrapers are in fact computer punch cards as FORTRAN STATEMENT is printed vertically on the brown and grey office blocks. Adamson’s choice of Fortran punch cards is no coincidence. Fortran (previously FORTRAN) is a high-level programming language originally developed by IBM in the 1950s [1] and used over the last 50 years by the scientific and engineering communities for intensive supercomputing tasks, such as climate modeling, satellite orbits and car crash simulations. In 1966, FORTRAN 66 was launched and soon became the industry standard. However, Adamson’s target is not Fortran [2] but its popularity, which he uses to underline a prophetic message about the power and influence of computers that have come to dominate the business world and rather than liberating office workers have increased their burden.

George Adamson was born in the Bronx, NY, in 1913, the son of a master car builder. He moved to England in 1921, studied at the Mining and Technical College in Wigan and entered the Wigan School of Art in January 1930. He specialised in engraving at Liverpool City Art School and began the first of many drawings for Punch in 1939. From 1940 to 1946 he served in the RAF and in 1943, he was appointed as an official war artist by the War Artists’ Advisory Committee. After the war, he lectured in engraving and illustration at Exeter College of Art and set up as a full-time illustrator and cartoonist in 1954. He illustrated more than 100 books including several by Ted Hughes. He won the commission to illustrate the Folio Society’s P. G. Wodehouse Short Stories and succeeded William Heath Robinson as illustrator of the Professor Branestawm books. He also worked extensively for Punch, Private Eye, Nursing Times and Occupational Health besides providing drawings for Cricket and British Airports World as well as many cartoons for the ‘Peterborough’ column of the Daily Telegraph [3]. His pictures are in the permanent collections of the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Ashmolean and the New York Public Library. He died peacefully in Exeter in 2005 [4].

Mike McKiernan

References