

Impressions of the Total Solar Eclipse 11th August 1999

We need to be up at 4am to get to our chosen vantage, Prawle Point, in good time. Unfortunately my cousin Mike has only his own radio alarm, so we pray to be woken, instead. I wake and look at my watch – it is 0358. As I begin to scramble into some clothes, Tim McMahon knocks on my door to waken me.

A quick cup of coffee, and we set off in the Saab, making good time and arriving at East Prawle at perhaps 5.30. Dawn is breaking, and the parking around the village green is already taken, but I find a place just outside the village easily enough.

We saw a glorious sunrise on the way down, but we know the forecast promises heavy cloud. We do not care, because we are *here*. Still the sky is clear as we make our way the couple of miles to the old coastguard station. The rising sun picks out the red in the rocks, and the scattered tents that weren't here when we reconnoitred yesterday afternoon.

There are only half a dozen or so people on the summit when we get there. We settle on a comfortable rock at the top – the very best vantage point. Even though a couple of hundred people eventually arrive, Tim and I are amongst the most southerly score of people in Devon. Our gathering consists only of those energetic enough to walk a fair distance. Most to begin with are stretched out in sleep. The atmosphere is quiet and friendly – and not a druid in sight.

Good companionship and conversation make the 5 hours to totality pass quickly. Nevertheless, it is not often one has the patience (or opportunity) to sit staring at one view for so long. The change in the moods of the sea and sky are amazing. The sea is at times deep blue and ruffled by areas of wind disturbance. At other times it has an oily calm greyness that blends into the horizon and negates all sense of distance.

The English sky, of course, is beginning to wrap itself up against the eclipse. Over in the southwest thick weather is approaching, whilst towards the sun the cloud takes on the appearance of beaten copper. Later, swirling Jovian cloud patterns appear overhead, which would not be amiss in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I expect flashes of distant lightning and a swirling vortex to appear.

I wonder if a small tactical nuclear explosion would clear the cloud nicely for the eclipse. I think about how high up the cliff the *tsunami* from a small colliding asteroid would come. Crowds of mewling herring gulls make sorties from the rocks below - we look forward to their comments on totality. But a few kittiwake also appear, together with passing cormorants, oystercatchers and a couple of playful jackdaws. A solitary greater black-backed gull makes an appearance at one stage, as does a seal, just below the cliffs, obviously wondering what the excitement is. I wonder if the dog tethered to a rock just below me will be released later to howl insanely or rush, lemming-like, over the edge.

On the human front, there is a good view of the flotilla of sailing boats of all sizes. They cruise around just for the sport of it, acquiring purpose only when, towards eclipse time, they break for the occasional patches of sunshine in the vain hope of a clear observation point. Later on, the Salcombe lifeboat, resplendent in ultramarine, white and orange, cruises inshore, and then surges off in a cloud of white spray. It has to be a scale-model.

Around mid-morning, over the headland to the west, a light aeroplane does a brief aerobatic display before ducking out under the thickening cloud. A while later, a sonic boom echoes from the south. He, at least, will get a clear view.

Some time after nine, the almanacs say that first contact has been made, and shortly afterwards the cloud thins to reveal a watery sun with a reassuring bite out of it at 2 o'clock – those astronomers were actually right! There are only a few more direct glimpses, because the cloud soon thickens to a double layer of quilted grey.

Nevertheless it remains bright until the gathering gloom is deep enough to convince us that it is caused by the moon, and not the clouds. Looking around, each hilltop and headland within sight has its own small population of the curious. There is a sense of omen – people no longer talk much.

Totality is due at 11.13. A couple of minutes before, the western horizon begins to look ominously dark. The cloud cover precludes seeing the advancing moonshadow crossing the ocean, but when it comes, the day dies with awesome speed. Within seconds, an uncanny night covers the world as far as we can see, except for a narrow sunset-glow on the far eastern horizon.

A multitude of navigation lights reveal the position of the boats on the water. Half a mile away, on the next headland, tiny sparks of light appear – the automatic flashes of a hundred cameras. The gulls inform us of their alarm. It is beautiful. It is awesome. A primaevial fear suddenly clutches me – supposing the day does not come back? I will never again mock the superstition of my ancestors.

As soon as the glow on the eastern horizon finally dies, it miraculously reappears in the west. Suddenly there is a rushing roar and a tail of fire below my feet. Somebody has set off a rocket. As it explodes in coloured stars over the sea, the crowd breaks into spontaneous applause and cheering.

The return of light is, if anything, even more absurdly quick. I take a photograph of the dark headland, and as soon as I have done so, the bay is in twilight. I take another, and it is merely overcast again. We have been under the hand of God, and lived.

The covenant with Noah promises that day and night shall not cease while the earth remains, but we take the regularity of the seasons for granted at our peril. It is only by his grace that our light remains. This eclipse was predicted, but it need not be so. The restraint of chaos, which we assume as a right, is actually a privilege.

During the hours of waiting, the conversation amongst the band of pilgrims was of facts, and times, and magnitudes. After the eclipse, as we walk back towards East Prawle, the talk is of fear, and awe, and our humanity.

As we sit in the Saab, hood down, in gridlocked country lanes, the delay seems to trouble nobody. Bach never sounded sweeter. The news reader says, "The weather will continue bright and cloudy – but who cares?" Who indeed.

"It got dark!" Tim keeps saying on our long journey home. Only those who have seen the eclipse begin to understand that darkness.

Jon Garvey

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