

Bright light could signal disaster of meteoric size

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At four minutes past three on a quiet March afternoon, some tourists admiring the view from the Mount Sugarloaf Lookout were startled by a crackly, swishing sound that broke the silence and seemed to come from all around them.

One of the tourists, who happened to be gazing towards the west, briefly saw a light as bright as the sun moving in a northerly direction before dropping out of sight below the horizon.

Her cries of alarm drew the gaze of the others who observed a glare like a false sunset just as the eerie sounds ended abruptly with a sharp crack.

At that moment, the NSW electricity supply failed as circuit breaks in switchyards all over the State tripped out simultaneously.

Emergency back-up supplies showed power station and control centre controllers the extent of a massive failure they they could do little to ease because communications had also failed.

Workers in buildings began to move away from their dead equipment, those in windowless rooms groping in complete darkness.

On the top of Sugarloaf, the silence was shattered by the roar of automatic diesel generators trying to restore interrupted TV broadcasts.

The tourists stared thunder-struck at the dirty brown cauliflower-like dome of debris rising into the western sky and began to suspect that they had only minutes to live.

Amid the growing panic in a Newcastle without power, with few operating telephones and the radio stations struggling to get back on the air, people flocked outside, where some caught sight of the evil-looking brown cloud.

One hundred seconds after the power failure, the first seismic shock wave hit Newcastle with a force beyond any previous registration in the Richter scale.

No building was left standing. The Taxation Office and several others disappeared completely as they were swallowed up by collapsed mine workings.

The Steelworks tore itself apart with secondary explosions and molten ores wreaked their own havoc.

St their bearing gave way under the strain, the coasting generators at Eraring ripped apart the collapsing power station.

A one-day cricket match at Non 1 Sportsground came to an abrupt end as the pitch heaved and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Just over seven minutes after the devastating earth-quake, the blast wave struck Newcastle with a fury surpassing any storm in human memory.

Fires which had broken out in flattened industrial plants were either snuffed out instantly or whipped into a torch of flame that ignited every combustible in sight.

The rest of NSW and most of the eastern States of Australia suffered the same fate. Few people were left alive. The devastation was total.

The Shaky Isles across the Tasman Sea shook as they had rarely shaken before but they were spared the worst fury of the air-blast wave.

Elsewhere in the world no city was spared damage from the massive earthquake which had our globe ringing like a bell of doom for hours on end.

Worse came from the cloud of debris which blotted out the sun over the southern hemisphere and much of the northern hemisphere for several years.

As disaster control measures began getting on top of the worldwide calamity, attention was turned toward Australia.

The first reconnaissance flights to pierce the clouds of dust and smoke found a crater, 10km across, where the town of Cobar once stood.

Planetary astronomers quickly concluded that Cobar had been struck by a meteoroid about a kilometre in diameter: an apocalyptic event that is always on the cards.