

Sauron's Darkness

by Alex Lewis

The environmental catastrophe of 1991 occasioned by Saddam Hussein's firing of the Kuwaiti oil fields is a disaster not comparable to any previously seen in terms of oil-related fires. The statistics make for grim reading: at one time, over 600 oil wells were burning, of which in July 1991 over 450 were still alight. Over a million barrels a day quite literally went up in smoke, and that smoke ended up in the lower atmosphere. Environmentalists originally predicted that the smoke particles might go up as high as 20 miles into the stratosphere and so affect the whole global climate. They were proven wrong, for it has been shown that the smoke has risen only some 5 miles before falling back earthwards again, and that the particles are excellent at nucleating water droplets, and so they come to earth within a much shorter distance than previously thought. Even so, smoke from the Kuwait oil fires has been discovered in the snow on the Himalayas.

So what has any of this to do with *The Lord of the Rings*, you might understandably ask? I have been living in Saudi Arabia during this environmental catastrophe, and have had a chance to get close-up experience of the phenomenon. I would like therefore in the light of this (no pun intended) to compare it to the darkness that Sauron released during the War of the Ring, and make some interesting observations in that regard.

In Appendix B of *The Lord of the Rings*, the dates of the major events are given:

March 9th: The Darkness begins to flow out of Mordor.

March 10th: The Dawnless Day (the day that Faramir returns to Minas Tirith).

March 11th: The first assault on Lórien from Dol Guldur.

March 12th: Frodo and Sam in Shelob's lair.

March 13th: The Pelennor Fields overrun.

March 14th: The Battle before the city gates.

March 15th: The Darkness breaks at dawn; the

Witch-King breaks the city gates at Minas Tirith. Second assault on Lórien.

March 22nd: The third assault on Lórien.

So the Darkness lasted from March 9th to the early morning of March 15th - a period of seven days.

From references within *The Lord of the Rings* one can calculate that the Darkness covered a vast region of Middle-earth, extending at the very least 500 miles from Mount Doom, and possibly as far as 800 miles. This statement can be corroborated from evidence within *The Lord of the Rings* as follows:

In the *Muster of Rohan*, Hírgon of Gondor says: "It comes from Mordor, lord. It began last night at sunset. From the hills in the Eastfold of your realm I saw it rise and creep across the sky, and all night as I rode it came behind eating up the stars. Now the great cloud hangs over all the land between here and the Mountains of Shadow; and it is deepening. War has already begun."¹

At this point Theoden and his Rohirrim were at Dunharrow, and that is some 450 miles from Mount Doom as the Nazgûl flies. But in order for the sky to be darkened, it would have to go much further, at least another 50-100 miles, in order to stop the light of the evening sun coming in from the West.

Like a smoke pall, this darkness affects them too: "The world was darkling. The very air seemed brown, and all things around were black and grey and shadowless; there was a great stillness."² Yet unlike a fire or a product of some volcanic outburst, nor yet like a true storm cloud, it has no movement due to heat effects or swirling of clouds, for Tolkien has described it to us through Merry's eyes: "No shape of cloud could be seen Overhead there hung a heavy roof, sombre and featureless, and light seemed rather to be failing than growing."³ And unlike the smoke from the burning oil wells in Kuwait, there is no smell of

burning. Had there been, the Rohirrim would not have detected the burning smell of Minas Tirith as they approached it: "A smell of burning was in the air and a very shadow of death."⁴ Also, unlike a volcanic eruption, where one would expect sulphurous smells, Tolkien did not describe any. This was a darkness without smells, it seems.

And, unlike the effect of the Kuwaiti oil fires, the blotting of the sun was extended far further. One hundred miles, or even fifty, away from Kuwait and its oil wells, the sunlight was dimmed, but one could see. There seemed to be a black fog that obscured buildings 250 to 500 metres from your vision. The only places where "day became night" were right in Kuwait and on its borders with Iraq and Iran - i.e., within twenty miles or so of the burning oil fires. Yet in *The Ride of the Rohirrim* Théoden says: "All is night now," and Ghân-buri-Ghân replies: "It is all dark, but it is not all night When sun comes we feel her, even when she is hidden. Already she climbs over East-mountains."⁵ Now, this is still something like 300 miles away from Mount Doom! The effect of Sauron's Darkness seems to have been perhaps ten times more concentrated than all the Kuwaiti oil fires burning together; an awesome thought! Let us compare the real world, and we see that in Riyadh in July 1991 it was a bit fuzzy, but hardly the same foggiess as in Dammam or Bahrain. Dubai also had essentially clear skies. The darkening effect almost clears after 100 miles. In Khafji, which is in the neutral zone between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, it was like a very overcast day, but not quite dark enough to use car lights. Colour could still be seen, unlike night-time. The smoke can be detected up to 300 miles away, but only as a slight effect of darkening of the air - a haziness of sunlight, but nothing more. There is a chemical dilution effect with distance that follows the inverse square law, so that concentrations of smoke diminish rapidly.

In Minas Tirith, the darkness was even worse, and here it is likened to a cloud: "It was dark and dim all day. From the sunless dawn until evening the heavy shadow had deepened Far above a great cloud streamed slowly westward from the Black Land, devouring light [The

great pall had now stretched far into the West, and only as it sank at last into the Sea did the Sun escape to send out a brief farewell gleam before the night, even as Frodo saw it at the Cross Roads touching the head of the fallen king. But ... the fields of the Pelennor ... were brown and drear."⁶ And here we have the first indication that the darkness was not only directed towards Minas Tirith and Gondor beyond, but also down towards the sea.

Some of Tolkien's characters discuss the darkness. Pippin thinks it is due to the weather: "The very air seems thick and brown! Do you often have such glooms when the wind is in the East?"

"Nay," said Beregon, "this is no weather of the world. This is some device of his malice, some broil of fume from the Mountain of Fire"⁷

So we have Tolkien's characters voicing different opinions. Yet I believe that Beregon's thoughts concerning the device of Sauron's malice to be closer than his other guess of it having its origins in Mount Doom. Gandalf too was quick to question Faramir about when the darkness began, indicating that he thought that Sauron might have regained the One Ring and begun a sorcerous darkness with his regained strength, a prelude to his devouring the world itself in a second darkness.

Comparing Sauron's Darkness to my real life experience with Eastern Saudi Arabia and the Kuwaiti oil fires: the smoke oomes down to ground level and produces a black fog; it does not stay high up and blot out the light the way an eclipse would. It is just like a foggy day, or at the most a heavily overcast day. We can be certain that Sauron could not have altered the course of the moon to produce an eclipse for seven days running - he did not have those sort of powers.

If the Darkness of Sauron was caused by volcanic means, the health problems from such a smoke would be enormous and many would have died of lung diseases thereafter. For instance, back to the Middle East: a report produced by Saudi authorities has shown that for people living in Dammam (about 250 miles from the oil fires) it was equivalent to smoking

20 cigarettes a day, and living in Kuwait was the equivalent of smoking 2,000 cigarettes a day! Indeed, people in Kuwait wore face masks when walking outside to stop the smoke getting into their lungs, and when I was there the smoke darkened the white car we were driving to a deep yellow colour with dark black spots over it that a car wash found difficult to remove satisfactorily. It is quite clear that the health implications of such vast oil fires in Kuwait will be great, and so a similarly caused darkness in Mordor stretching over most of Gondor and parts of Rohan would dot the same to its people, but we know that there were no wholesale deaths.

"The Pelennor lay dim beneath him, fading to the scarce guessed line of the Great River."⁸ It should have been possible for Pippin to see the river Anduin, but the darkness prevented it. And shortly thereafter, when Gandalf stabs out with his white light, the darkness is again described as a cloud: "the Nazgul ... passed away eastward vanishing into the lowering cloud above."⁹ We also know that the darkness extended south of the White Mountains, for Legolas telling of the Paths of the Dead said as much: "One day of light we rode, and then came the day without dawn, and still we rode on, and Ciril and Ringlo we crossed; and on the third day we came to Linhir above the mouth of Gilrain."¹⁰ The stone of Erech is also at least 450 miles from Mount Doom, and on the other side of a formidable range of mountains - a colossal natural barrier to a smoke plume, but in this case it did not stop the darkness. So I believe there was more to this darkness than Mount Doom spuming forth its gases and fumes. Had it been such an eruption, Frodo and Sam (as well as all the Oros in Mordor) would have died of asphyxiation long before reaching the foothills of Mount Doom. So, for instance, did many die in Pompeii, not from lava or ash, but from lack of oxygen. I do not even believe Mount Doom to have been the focal point of the darkness at all, otherwise Frodo and Sam would not have even *seen* the fiery mountain from a distance, not with such great activity. I believe it may have come directly from Barad-Dûr, due to some massive sorcery.

And in its dissipation there was an air of unnatural causes: "The darkness was breaking too

soon ...", and so the Witch-King left the gates of Minas Tirith, and returned astride his winged steed, and...[t]he new morning was blotted from the sky."¹¹ And yet this darkness had stretched a hundred miles at least beyond Minas Tirith! How quickly it dissipated! Far too quickly for it to be natural. In *The Land of Shadow* the transformation is even clearer: "Day was coming again in the world outside, and far beyond the glooms of Mordor the Sun was climbing over the eastern rim of Middle-earth The easterly wind that had been blowing ever since they left Ithilien now seemed dead"¹² So now we know what drove the darkness westwards, and that the driving force had stopped. Soon after, things change: "Look at it! The wind's changed! Something's happening. He's not having it all his own way. His darkness is breaking up out in the world there."¹³

In Eastern Saudi Arabia, the prevailing wind direction is from the north-east, which drove the smoke down that way, but if the wind changes direction as it did on one day, the sun then came out as normal, although the process took some hours and tended to be patchy. And most importantly, the smoke did not "disappear", but was pushed elsewhere, waiting ever to return with a another change in wind direction.

So what caused Sauron's Darkness to fail? My guess is that Galadriel had much to do with it.

The first assault on Lórien occurred on March 11th from Dol Guldur, and the Darkness was by then two days old. It seems fairly reasonable to think that the darkness may even have stretched as far as Lórien. If so, then Galadriel would have found some way to counteract it, for, according to Appendix B, "the power that dwelt there was too great for any to overcome, unless Sauron had come there himself."¹⁴ Then, on the following day, March 12th, Sam and Frodo used Galadriel's phial in Shelob's lair. I believe that this may have alerted Galadriel to the fact that they had a chance to complete their quest. On the very day the Darkness was broken, Sam and Frodo used the phial of Galadriel to break through the Watchers in the Tower, and spoke Quenya, which

Sam certainly would not have known, and one feels that these words might have been placed in their mouths - by whom? I guess again that it might have been Galadriel. Later on Sam wished for light and water, and he got both. "If ever I see the Lady again, I will tell her! ... Light and now water!"¹⁵ So Sam Gamgee certainly believed that Galadriel was actively helping them. The second assault on Lórien on March 15th coincided with all this, as if Sauron perhaps realised that something was working against his Darkness. But it could not avail him. The Darkness dissipated in a matter of hours.

This examination of the darkness of Sauron leaves the impression that this was no darkness that could be accounted for in purely physical terms, such as an eclipse, smoke from a volcano, or storm clouds. It was something far more potent. It was something that was

probably at least ten times greater in effectiveness and range than the 600 Kuwaiti oil fires, which just goes to show that Sauron, even without his Ruling Ring, was no easy person to defeat. Rightly did Gandalf the White fear him: White is mighty, but Black is mightier still.

Notes (References are to the 1968 one-volume edition of *The Lord of the Rings*).

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| 1. p.832. | 9. p.841. |
| 2. <i>Ibid.</i> | 10. p.909. |
| 3. <i>Ibid.</i> | 11. pp.872-873. |
| 4. p.864. | 12. p.952. |
| 5. p.865. | 13. p.954. |
| 6. pp.838-839. | 14. p.1131. |
| 7. p.839. | 15. p.956. |
| 8. p.840. | |

Before and After

BEFORE

*Caught in time, held between two worlds
Nothing now to do but wait and listen
For the moment when the banner is unfurled
And on the spears and swords the blood will glisten.*

*Looking out beyond the city walls
Straining eyes to pierce the growing gloom -
The dark fog creeping through the ancient halls
Drifts like a silent messenger of doom.*

*Above, the darkened sky that once was blue
Where in other days the sun shone clear
Where swollen evil swallows light and truth
In heavy hanging clouds of night and fear.*

*The hot and heavy air still presses down
Close around, and catches laboured breath.
The city waits without a word or sound
For fate to bring it victory or death.*

*For many years the threat has slowly grown
Creeping in the shadows, gaining power.
Now it stretches out, its full strength shown,
To bring the free world to its final hour.*

*Now at last there comes an end of waiting.
The horns are sounding loud across the land.
Breaking through the clouds, one bright ray shining
To light the city's final glorious stand.*

*Within all hearts, a song that has no ending -
Beyond this moment no-one can foresee.
Either light or dark will reign forever.
All will die, or all be now set free.*

By Lucy Bray

AFTER

*Silent and soft, the evening gently falls,
A cool wind bringing peace and grey half-light.
No watchmen now need guard the city walls.
No more need to fear the coming night.*

*After so long, so many bitter years
The peace and victory seem so unreal.
Forgotten birdsong once more meets all ears,
And soon the war-torn land will start to heal.*

*In a short time the victory bells will ring
And joy and laughter fall like golden rain,
Fear cast away, and all the land will sing
Rejoicing in its freedom found again.*

*Yet mingled with the joy, the grief and weeping -
For every victory a price is paid:
Tears for those who lie forever sleeping
Beneath the land they gave up life to save.*

*Nor can all the living share the laughter.
Not for all eyes is the future bright.
Some hearts will be scarred for all time after,
Dark memories return to cloud the light.*

*As the new age dawns, the world must change,
And some fair things must be forever lost.
For others' healing some must pay with pain,
Sacrificing all they treasured most.*

*The future dawns, and some must journey far
Beyond the sea to seek the healing lands.
Those who stay take up the precious flame
To burn forever in new keepers' hands.*