

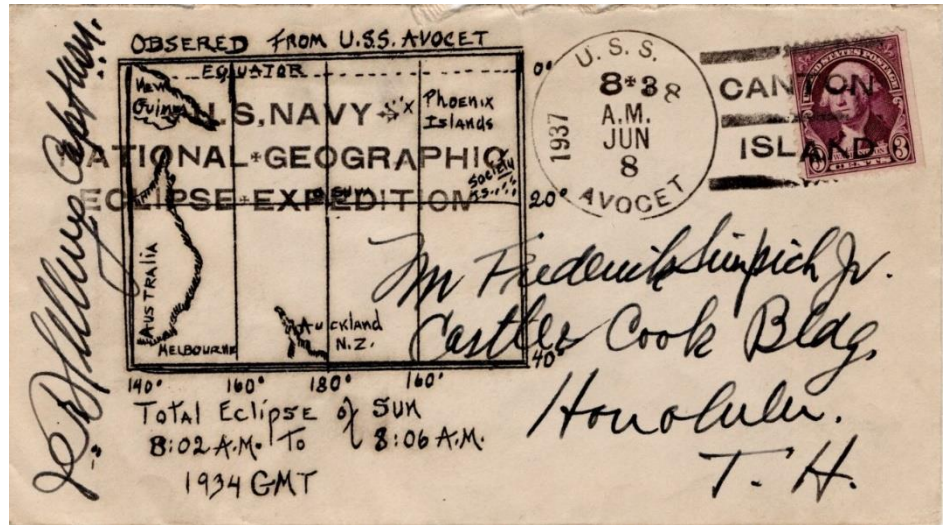
Total Solar Eclipse at Canton Island – June 8, 1937

Francis G. Loso

Solar eclipses are beautiful and awe inspiring things to behold, but before the technology of the space age, they also provided the only opportunity for scientists to study portions of the solar atmosphere holding important clues needed to unravel mysteries about the inner workings of the sun. Their infrequency of occurrence and narrow path of visibility typically requires travel to far flung remote locations to observe the few fleeting minutes of totality when the moon completely blocks out the sun, revealing only its atmosphere, the corona. Scientific expeditions to study eclipses were the space missions of their time. The eclipse of June 8, 1937 was much anticipated, offering the longest duration of totality of any eclipse in six hundred years, but it was visible only over a narrow path across the Pacific ocean.



The only landfall along the central part of the path was over a few remote and uninhabited islands. One of these was Canton (also Kanton) Island, part of the Phoenix Island group, now part of Kiribati. An expedition to Canton Island was led by University of Virginia astronomer S.A. Mitchell and supported by the National Geographic Society and the US Naval Observatory. The Navy assigned the mine sweeper USS Avocet, under the command of Capt. J.F. Hellweg, to transport and support the expedition. A second expedition from New Zealand, led by Professor C.B. Michie, was supported by the Royal Navy sloop HMS Wellington. The eclipse sparked much public interest as it was the first to be reported live coast to coast across the U.S. over the relatively new NBC radio network. NBC announcer George Hicks and two engineers were part of the American expedition. It is noted that clear weather prevailed on eclipse day, and the science mission was successful. Philatelic material from both expeditions commemorate the event.



Top to Bottom (shown at 75% (1-3) and 50% (4)):

1. Scott #KI 438, 35c, showing an overhead view of Kanton Island, one of a series on Kiribati Island Maps
2. Cover, to Honolulu, T.H., with US Navy – National Geographic cachet and USS Avocet Canton Island eclipse day cancellation (time of the eclipse – 8:38 am). Addressed to Frederick Simpich, Jr., son of National Geographic editor Frederick Simpich, Sr., and signed by Captain J.F Hellweg
3. Cover, to Kaitia, New Zealand with N.Z. Eclipse Expedition cachet, H.M.S. Wellington cachet (partially obscured) and USS Avocet eclipse day cancellation.
4. Original postcard, H.M.S. Wellington

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