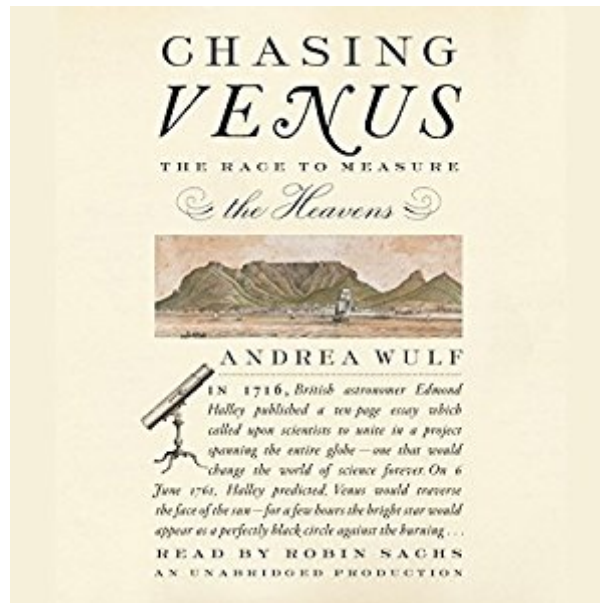


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# Chasing Venus: The Race To Measure The Heavens



## Synopsis

The author of the highly acclaimed *Founding Gardeners* now gives us an enlightening chronicle of the first truly international scientific endeavor - the 18th century quest to observe the transit of Venus and measure the solar system. On June 6, 1761, the world paused to observe a momentous occasion: the first transit of Venus between the earth and the sun in more than a century. Through that observation, astronomers could calculate the size of the solar system - but only if they could compile data from many different points of the globe, all recorded during the short period of the transit. Overcoming incredible odds and political strife, astronomers from Britain, France, Russia, Germany, Sweden, and the American colonies set up observatories in remote corners of the world, only to have their efforts thwarted by unpredictable weather and warring armies. Fortunately, transits of Venus occur in pairs: eight years later, the scientists would have another opportunity to succeed. *Chasing Venus* brings to life the personalities of the 18th century astronomers who embarked upon this complex and essential scientific venture, painting a vivid portrait of the collaborations, the rivalries, and the volatile international politics that hindered them at every turn. In the end, what they accomplished would change our conception of the universe and would forever alter the nature of scientific research.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I purchased this book after reading Andrea Wulf's biography of Alexander von Humboldt on which she did a wonderful job. This is obviously an earlier work, where she is still looking for her own style and write with her later confidence. The information is all there and the stories surrounding the

various observers are interesting, so I also read this book from cover to cover. After I finished I was very happy that I took the effort to watch the transit of June 2012 as I will have no other chance to observe the phenomenon (it will next occur in December 2117).

This meticulously researched and well structured book focuses on the human element of the 18th century Venus transit expeditions. It reads like a novel and you are left with a sense of wonder that people could actually go to such extremes for a scientific objective. I rated it the second best transit book after Sheehan and Westfall, "The Transits of Venus", because Sheehan and Westfall have much more technical material about transit conditions and uses of the observations. The two books are complementary, with Sheehan/Westfall providing the astronomy and an overview of the main expeditions and Wulf supplying many interesting and previously unpublished details on the participants and what they went through. It's a wonderful book and a credit to the author.

In her previous books, "The Brother Gardeners" and "Founding Gardeners," Andrea Wulf demonstrated her unique ability to convert topics I was not particularly interested in into fascinating studies. In this volume, about the Transit of Venus scientific expeditions in 1761 and 1769, she has accomplished this once again. These multi-national efforts to study and measure the passage of Venus across the sun the author characterizes as "the first global scientific project." This is because for the first time there were multiple national scientific teams working together to gather and collate data from these two events. This is especially true for the 1769 transit, where something like 250 scientists at some 130 locations around the world made (or tried to make) observations. While the British and French took the lead, there were other important actors as well. Catherine the Great, in her determination to propel Russia into modernity and western European culture, supported Russian participation (which meant trekking to Siberia). Even the future U.S. got into the act, with the involvement of David Rittenhouse and Benjamin Franklin. Sweden also dispatched observers to the far north. Particularly as regards the 1769 transit, it is amazing, considering the limits of 18th century travel resources, how widespread the observers ended up scattering themselves. Often, observer teams had to leave 6 months in advance of the transit date to make their destinations. Such dedication is to be commended. But collecting the data with 18th century instruments was only half the battle: the next challenge was to collate all this international data into meaningful numbers. For example, should all observations be accorded the same weight, or should some be discounted? Since there were many different data points, how could this all be collated into meaningful ranges. Remember, this was all before the modern computer made the scene. Yet, for all these challenges,

the joint computations yielded remarkably accurate findings close to the data generated today. What was all the fuss about? It would have hoped that accurate measurement of the transit would enable these 18th century scientists to accurately estimate the size of the universe and resolve issues for example like the distance from the earth to the sun. The author has organized and presented her extensive research findings in a pleasant and very cogent format. She discusses some expeditions in detail, others less so. The book is full of maps and helpful diagrams and documents relating to 18th century scientific technology. The author has included a helpful "dramatis personae" introducing the leading actors; complete lists of observers for both transits; a solid bibliography; and 43 pages of valuable notes. However, the main advantage of Wulf's books is that she can explain scientific concepts in a way that we non-scientific types can understand and benefit from. All around, just a very fine job.

Prospective buyers should know how slight this book is. The hardcover edition is 336 pages, but in the Kindle edition, about half of it is notes. Most of the text is narrative of the principal astronomical expeditions of 1761 and 1769, concentrating on the difficulty of traveling by ship, carriage, and sledge. The math and science involved are almost totally absent. Nor is there much discussion of the instruments and techniques used by the observers. You could get more science from the Wikipedia article about the transit of Venus and related articles about the astronomers and their instruments. So, although the book is well written, I can't really recommend it.

I got bored with this and stopped reading. I found Mark Anderson's *The Day the World Discovered the Sun: An Extraordinary Story of Scientific Adventure and the Race to Track the Transit of Venus* much more compelling and much more accurate. Anderson is an astrophysicist and a born storyteller. Wulf is definitely not the former and I'm not sure she's the latter either. I'm saddened by the inaccuracies and glaring omissions, especially when I note that Wulf's latest book (as of this review), about Humboldt, just won the Royal Society science award. The poor quality and inaccuracy of this Venus book makes me worry about the accuracy and quality of the Humboldt book. It's one thing to be a celebrated author; it's another to trade on that celebrity to have one's books -- accurate or not -- become bestsellers and award-winners.

With the excitement of the solar eclipse and the transit of Venus which happened earlier in 2012, I wanted to read about what it was like before light, and telephones and cameras to rally scientists around the world for a once in a lifetime event. Captain Cook ventured to the South Seas in support

of this event. It's an interesting read without getting bogged down in the science of the event. More about how do you cope with wars and weather and building telescopes and sailing (no planes!) for months to some remote island and hoping that the sky is clear enough to capture the event. Really pretty amazing stuff.

Fabulous book. Brilliantly written work on 1700's astronomy, science, and politics.

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