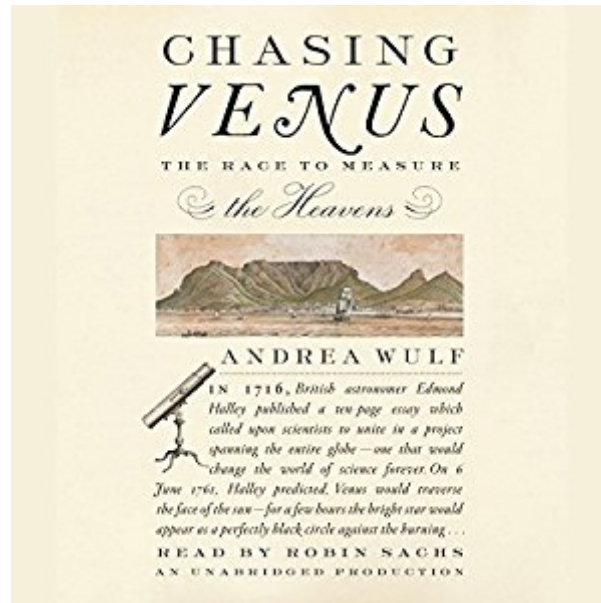


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# Chasing Venus: The Race To Measure The Heavens



## 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

As most reviewers have pointed out, this book was meticulously researched, but that may also be its downfall. Ultimately, it reads like a well-executed term paper, or maybe a PhD dissertation. It does indeed provide accounts of the major expeditions mounted to time the transits of 1761 and

1769, but these accounts lie flat on the page as a list of factual details and descriptions of events. I read Richard Holmes' "The Age of Wonder" a few months before this book, and his account of Joseph Banks in Tahiti is engaging and riveting, bringing to life the collision of cultures that occurred, the personalities of those involved, and weaving it all into a page-turning story. The contrast was clear in this book's coverage of James Cook's expedition to bring Banks to the South Seas, where the facts are recounted without really bringing the characters to life in my mind. The book also chooses odd, sometimes single-word, quotations from the source material (which is all referenced in the extensive notes). A typical example is on page 159: "The weather was glorious and Le Gentil rejoiced in the beauty of the mirrored surface of the water which, he wrote in his journal, was as smooth as a 'lake'." After a nice summary of the scene in the author's words, do we need to know that "lake" was the exact term used by Le Gentil? I couldn't help but think, either give us a whole sentence or phrase from Le Gentil's journal or simply reference the whole sentence as a paraphrase. The book is littered with these one- or two-word quotes that seem to be a replacement for footnotes rather than adding authenticity to the material. Finally, I'm not sure the author is completely comfortable explaining the astronomy involved.

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