



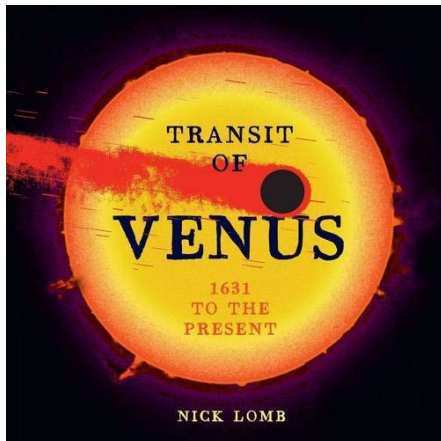
Transit of Venus: 1631 to the present

by Nick Lomb

New South Publishing, 2011. ISBN 9-7811742-232690. Pp 228, £47.95 (hbk).

The long-awaited transit of Venus in June 2004 inspired a tranche of well-written books. With the next transit coming up in June 2012, I was interested to see what would emerge this time round. Nick Lomb's *Transit of Venus: 1631 to the present* sets the standard of quality impressively high. Dr Lomb is consultant astronomer for the Sydney Observatory, which these days forms part of the Sydney Powerhouse Museum. He has written an engaging history of transits of Venus suitable for all levels of reader.

The book doesn't break much new ground, but tells familiar stories from the history of astronomy with authority and verve. There is a chapter on each of the eight transits from 1631 (predicted but unobserved) to 2012. Each transit is placed smoothly into its historical context, and the relevant science is introduced skilfully but unobtrusively. Not surprisingly, there is an antipodean flavour to the later chapters, but as the 1874 transit was best seen from the southern oceans, accounts from Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere slot neatly into the flow of the story. For 2012, there is an unfussy guide to safe solar observing and a summary of what will be seen, weather permitting, at various locations around the world.



The text is very well-written, with little to quibble. I would dispute that Jeremiah Horrocks calculated the length of the astronomical unit as 180 million km (my reading of his calculations suggests half that value) but certainly his estimate was much greater than received wisdom at the time. There is a comprehensive index, a short glossary, and I was amused to see a 'Transit Fast Facts' page at the beginning for those who want their information *right now*.

The look and feel of the book is sumptuous; full colour throughout with some stunning photography and plenty of contemporary images by NASA and others. I have one minor gripe – the graphic used for the book's cover and the chapter headings shows Venus trailing a peculiar red 'comet-tail', which can only confuse beginners. It is especially grating when one considers that throughout the book there are many variations, often spectacular, on the iconic 'black disk on the Sun'.

But my grumbles are few. This is a lovely book – suitable as a present, a souvenir, for coffee table or library shelf. Popular astronomy at its best.

Mike Frost

Mike Frost is Director of the BAA Historical Section. Like Jeremiah Horrocks, the first observer of a transit of Venus, he grew up in Lancashire and attended Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

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