## June 8, 2004: Venus in Transit

**by Eli Maor**

**Princeton University Press, 2000. ISBN 0-691-04874-6. Pp. xiii + 179, £14.50/ $22.95 (hbk).**

## Transit: When planets cross the Sun

**by Michael Maunder & Patrick Moore**

**Springer–Verlag, 2000. ISBN 1-85233-621-8. Pp. viii + 164, £19.00 (pbk).**

No-one alive today can recall a transit of Venus. The last time Venus crossed the Sun's disk was in 1882. Little surprise, then, that the forthcoming transit of 2004 June 8 is already creating a modest flurry of anticipation. Though it is unlikely to stir widespread interest among the public at large, sheer rarity value will ensure that aficionados of astronomy will be keen to observe and record the event.

Scientifically, transits now have little more than curiosity value. But it was not always so. In the eighteenth century, accurate observations of the transits of Venus in 1761 and 1769 were considered the potential key to a great unsolved problem of the day: the absolute scale of the solar system. Intrepid observers scattered to remote sites around the globe in pursuit of this prize. The perils and adventures that befell them, and their nineteenth-century successors who dispersed for the transits in 1874 and 1882, are fascinating episodes in the history of astronomy.

Eli Maor's book is primarily a straightforward historical account of the five observed transits of Venus, with a final few pages on the circumstances of the forthcoming transit of 2004. The author, who is a Chicago mathematics professor, has mainly drawn on a small selection of popular books and articles, which are fully cited after each chapter. He has made a good job of the synthesis and his book will appeal to readers who enjoy an easy-going story and are not concerned with the details of how to observe transits for themselves.

Michael Maunder and Patrick Moore have produced a rather different kind of book. About the same length as Maor's, it justifies its membership of Springer's *Practical Astronomy* series with a substantial section on observing transits. Anyone contemplating observations of the 2004 Venus transit, or indeed of the Sun at any time, will find this a useful and eminently sensible guide. Potential readers from outside the UK should note, however, that it is written from an essentially British perspective.

Maunder and Moore have included the more frequent transits of Mercury within their brief, though their book did not make publication in advance of the November 1999 transit of Mercury, which was obviously the authors' original intention. They also touch on other related topics, such as transits of Jupiter and Saturn by their moons, and the story of Vulcan, a non-existent planet once purported to orbit the Sun closer than Mercury. There is less history than in Maor, but the main points are adequately covered.

These books are largely complementary. Maunder and Moore tackle the wider variety of topics with a predominantly practical bent, while Maor focuses on the historical record relating to the observed transits of Venus. Choose according to your main interest, or read both.

**Jacqueline Mitton**

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