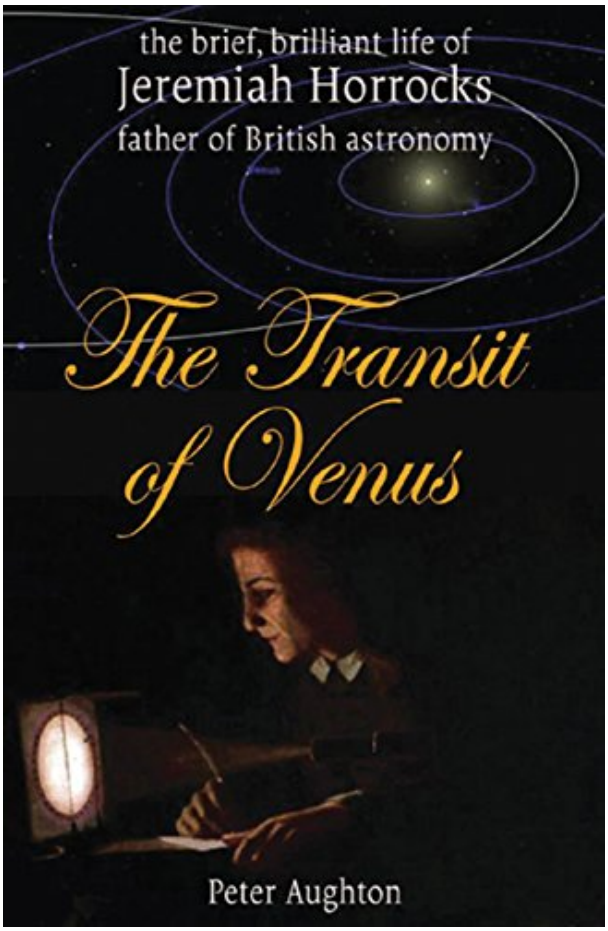
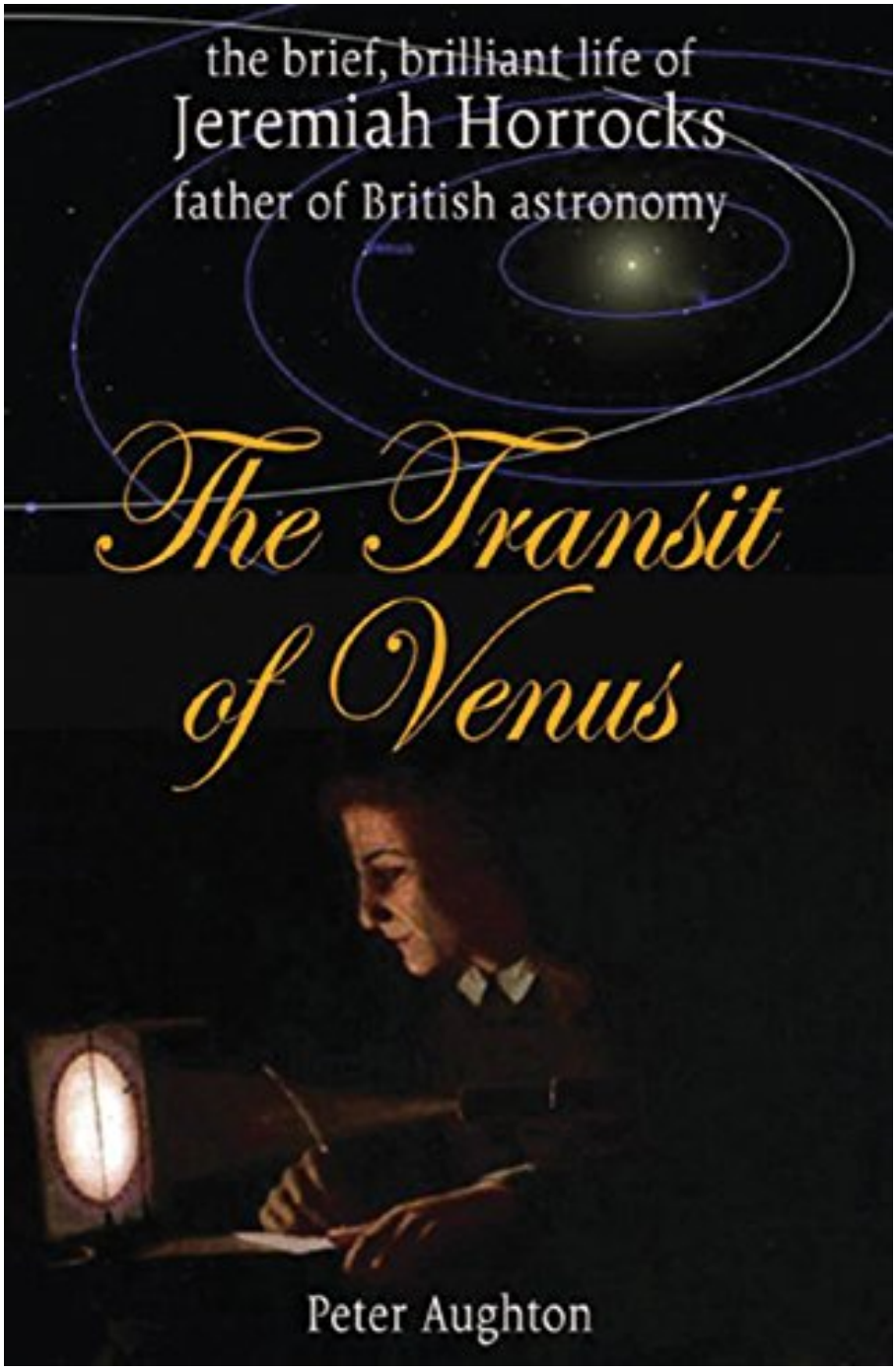
THE TRANSIT OF VENUS: THE BRIEF, BRILLIANT LIFE OF JEREMIAH HORROCKS, FATHER OF BRITISH ASTRONOMY BY PETER AUGHTON





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Review

Observing the transit of Venus across the face of the Sun caused excitement in America when it made a rare appearance in 2012. Drawing largely on primary sources, Aughton (UK author of) presents a biography of the little-known British astronomer who predicted and observed this event in 1639. The book includes a new preface, chronology, glossary, and illustrations. (Reference and Research Book News)

About the Author

PETER AUGHTON was born in Southport and educated at King George V School. He has always been fascinated by the great city of Liverpool and his earliest memories are of the Mersey ferries, the Overhead Railway and the shipping, the trams and the post war bomb sites. Peter has been a member of the Liverpool and District Family History Society for many years and he still gives occasional talks to the society. He is a lecturer at the University of the West of England, and his career includes twelve years in the aerospace industry.

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The Transit of Venus is a rare event. It will next be witnessed in the USA during 2012. The story of how it was first observed is a missing chapter in the history of astronomy. Most people might name Newton or Edmund Halley as the greatest British astronomer, but both men drew heavily on the work of a mid-seventeenth-century man from Lancashire, Jeremiah Horrocks. Horrocks was a man ahead of his time. In 1639 he was the first person to see the image of Venus on the face of the sun. He appreciated the true scale of the solar system, charted the positions of the planets more accurately than ever before, and formulated a valid theory for the wanderings of the moon. In the period before the English Civil War of 1642-49, he was considered the greatest astronomer in the kingdom. He died at a tragically early age, but his legacy to science is quite remarkable.

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5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

A Forgotten Astronomer, Worth Remembering
By Rob Hardy
Isaac Newton famously said, "If I have seen further than others before me, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants." Newton was not always so quick to acknowledge his debt to his fellow scientists, but everyone knows the remark could apply to indisputable giants like Galileo and Kepler. However, he also would have meant a giant who has, almost three centuries later, become almost an unknown within the history of astronomy. In _The Transit of Venus: The Brief, Brilliant Life of Jeremiah Horrocks, Father of British Astronomy_ (Weidenfeld & Nicolson), Peter Aughton, who has written before on the voyages of Captain Cook and on Newton, puts Horrocks into his rightful place. It would be too much to say that he gives us a full picture of Horrocks and his work, for the mass of materials about the astronomer is just too meager. However, Horrocks was a brilliant astronomical observer and theoretician, and Newton knew it then as we should now.

There was in June 2004 a transit of Venus, only the fifth since Horrocks watched his in 1639. A transit occurs when Venus seems to cross the face of the Sun, and was important in those days because it could be used to calculate how far the Sun was from the Earth. He studied Kepler's work at college in Cambridge, and trusted Kepler, but not blindly; he discovered that Kepler, who had correctly predicted a 1631 transit of Venus, had mistakenly missed a transit that was coming in 1639. Horrocks only realized this with a month to spare, but he was ready to trace the planet crossing the Sun; he did so by training his telescope on the Sun and projecting the picture upon a screen within a darkened room. It was his mathematical analysis of the movements and timing of what he had seen that enabled him to confirm that Venus was moving in an elliptical orbit around the Sun, just as Kepler's laws had implied. However, a clear view of the planet crossing the solar disk showed it to be much smaller than Kepler had thought, and the calculated distance between the Earth and the Sun was far larger than any previous astronomer had come close to considering. Copernicus had estimated the distance to be 7.5 million kilometers, Kepler 22.1, and Horrocks weighed in with 95.4. Even then, he was well below the real figure of 149, but it can be said without exaggeration that he was the first man who had an inkling of how big the solar system really was.

Horrocks wrote up his account of the transit, and also went on to show that the Moon tracked an elliptical, not circular, path around the Earth, although the path of the Moon wobbled irregularly due to the gravity of the Sun. He also showed that Saturn and Jupiter were vastly larger than the Earth. Astonishingly, he made these discoveries when he was only twenty-two; only a year later in 1641 he was dead. There is no evidence about the cause of his death. His account of his researches was not published until 1662, and he was belatedly recognized as a genius by the new Royal Society. His work was revolutionary at the time he did it, but was not as influential as it could have been, if he had been within the mainstream of British science rather than observing and theorizing near Liverpool, if he had lived longer, and if Britain were not torn by its Civil War. Newton, in his monumental _Principia_, gave special credit to Horrocks for divining the elliptical orbit of the Moon. His influence might be small, but his importance as an observer and as a theoretician (those qualities are not often so well combined in one person) is clear. As much as can be known about him is in Aughton's necessarily brief but admiring review, from which readers will get a good idea of how astronomy was done at the time, and a welcome introduction to an original thinker.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.
Horrocks Deserves a Better Biographer
By Railbird
This is an interesting, if frustrating book. Mr. Aughton does yeoman work in compiling and organizing a great deal of historical and genealogical information and presents his story in a workmanlike, even occasionally a fascinating manner.

Like most casual students of the history of astronomy, I was aware of Jeremiah Horrocks as the first person to observe a transit of Venus, but I knew little of the brief life and fascinating times or Mr. Horrocks. I am most grateful to Mr. Aughton for making the details of Horrock's life and times accessible to a more general audience. Nonetheless, the deficiencies are distracting and annoying.

The frustration arises from numerous factual errors and misconceptions that riddle this otherwise delightful book. Let me cite some of the more egregious and indisputable errors. First, in his description of Galileo's "Dialogue", he states that the book is a dialogue "between" Aristotle, Ptolemy and Copernicus, when in fact the characters are named Salviati, Sagredo and Simplicio, who represent the viewpoints of the Copernican, an intelligent layman and the traditionalists, respectively.

Next, he consistently and repeatedly attributes planetary parallax to the rotation of the earth. He seems confused by Ptolemy's accurate account of diurnal lunar parallax and planetary parallax. See, Figure 7, for instance. Actually, during one night the earth's orbital motion (as opposed to rotational) motion is more than 30 million kilometers, while rotation adds fewer than a paltry 13 thousand additional kilometers. Since the moon shares the earth's solar orbit and is relatively close to the earth, the effect on lunar parallax is apparent. On much more distant planets in separate orbits, not so much. In principle, with perfect angular measurements, one could tease out the effect of earth's rotation, but he does not convey any sense of this. And Horrocks measurements were nowhere nearly good enough to furnish a reasonable value of the astronomical unit.

One last egregious example, near Figure 11, discussing the time of sunrise and sunset near the December solstice will suffice. Mr. Aughton attributes the fact that sunset occurs earlier in the day shortly after the solstice than on the day of solstice to the eccentricity of the earth's orbit. The sun would, in fact, set early in the day in the days prior to the solstice, and rise later in the day afterwards, even if the earth's orbit were perfectly circular, though the precise values would be different. The fact that the time of the earth's perihelion is near the winter solstice exaggerates this effect, granted.

Aside from these indisputable factual errors, Mr. Aughton seems to be spreading popular misconceptions about the history of astronomy, misconceptions that every serious historian of science should resist. Foremost is the dismissive summary of the Galileo-Vatican controversy. One would never suspect from this summary that Pope Urban had read the manuscript of "Dialogues" and had personally asked his friend Galileo a few reasonable questions about the treatment of tides. Galileo told the Pope that he would fix it in the final version. His "fix" was to have the Pope's questions placed in the mouth of the doltish character Simplicio, only to have them dismissively swatted aside by the all-wise Salviati. When Galileo's enemies used the Inquisition to attack him, his former friend, Urban VIII, was not there to help him. It is an embarrassment to supporters of Galileo, that the Pope's question was reasonable and Galileo's response was not. An explanation of the tides would have to await Newton, for alas, Horrocks died too young.

In addition, he states that Copernican astronomy was "simpler" and more accurate than Ptolemaic. Tell that to Horrocks, who was quite dismissive of Lansberg, a Copernican. Actually, Copernican astronomy was more complicated than Ptolemaic, in that it required more, not fewer, epicycles and lead to more laborious calculations. Copernicus could not likely have been more accurate than Ptolemy, since he used Ptolemy's observations and predictions as the basis of his model. Today, we would describe Copernicus' work as more of a translation of coordinates, and not necessarily to a more useful set of coordinates. Owen Gingerich and others have compared Ptolemaic and Copernican models for accuracy and they are essentially equivalent. To modern tastes Occam's razor is embodied in the notion of model parameters. When comparing two models of comparable accuracy, the one requiring fewer parameters is preferred. Copernicus needed more parameters, therefore those familiar with regression theory and Fisher's F-test would have preferred Ptolemy's model.

Mr. Aughton's writing is pedestrian, but his subject is transcendent. Mr. Aughton certainly conveys enough of the story to keep one reading, especially if one is interested in the history of astronomy. I live in Massachusetts, and I found the links between Cambridge University and the Puritan founders of the Commonwealth especially interesting. He certainly conveys the anguish and waste of the religious wars in England at the start of the 17th Century.

If you are interested in the history of astronomy, and in one of its little visited and under appreciated heroes, do read this book.

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful.
The Life and Times of a Genius
By George Poirier
The accomplishments of Jeremiah Horrocks, as depicted in this book, are truly astounding. The author carefully reconstructs Horrocks' genealogy, his brief life and his ground-breaking work in astronomy, amidst the backdrop of seventeenth century England. The book is well-written, clear and engaging. Less appealing to me was that the book contains many passages reproduced in the original old English. This slowed me down a bit since I found them cumbersome due to the different spelling and sentence structure characteristic of the period. On the other hand, this may be inevitable, at least to some degree, because of the book's subject matter. Overall, this is an interesting read that would likely be particularly appealing to astronomers at all levels.

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