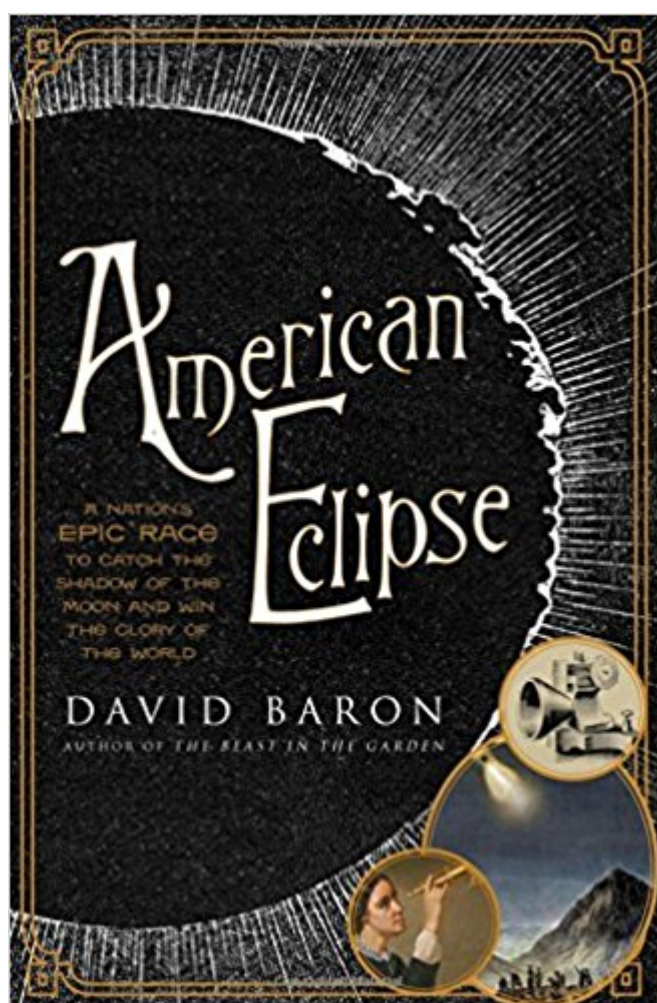


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# American Eclipse: A Nation's Epic Race To Catch The Shadow Of The Moon And Win The Glory Of The World



## Synopsis

Richly illustrated and meticulously researched, *American Eclipse* ultimately depicts a young nation that looked to the skies to reveal its towering ambition and expose its latent genius. On a scorching July afternoon in 1878, at the dawn of the Gilded Age, the moon's shadow descended on the American West, darkening skies from Montana Territory to Texas. This rare celestial event—a total solar eclipse—offered a priceless opportunity to solve some of the solar system's most enduring riddles, and it prompted a clutch of enterprising scientists to brave the wild frontier in a grueling race to the Rocky Mountains. Acclaimed science journalist David Baron, long fascinated by eclipses, re-creates this epic tale of ambition, failure, and glory in a narrative that reveals as much about the historical trajectory of a striving young nation as it does about those scant three minutes when the blue sky blackened and stars appeared in mid-afternoon. In vibrant historical detail, *American Eclipse* animates the fierce jockeying that came to dominate late nineteenth-century American astronomy, bringing to life the challenges faced by three of the most determined eclipse chasers who participated in this adventure. James Craig Watson, virtually forgotten in the twenty-first century, was in his day a renowned asteroid hunter who fantasized about becoming a Gilded Age Galileo. Hauling a telescope, a star chart, and his long-suffering wife out west, Watson believed that he would discover Vulcan, a hypothesized "intra-Mercurial" planet hidden in the sun's brilliance. No less determined was Vassar astronomer Maria Mitchell, who in an era when women's education came under fierce attack fought to demonstrate that science and higher learning were not anathema to femininity. Despite obstacles erected by the male-dominated astronomical community, an indifferent government, and careless porters, Mitchell courageously charged west with a contingent of female students intent on observing the transcendent phenomenon for themselves. Finally, Thomas Edison—a young inventor and irrepressible showman—braved the wilderness to prove himself to the scientific community. Armed with his newest invention, the tasimeter, and pursued at each stop by throngs of reporters, Edison sought to leverage the eclipse to cement his place in history. What he learned on the frontier, in fact, would help him illuminate the world. With memorable accounts of train robberies and Indian skirmishes, David Baron's page-turning drama refracts nineteenth-century science through the mythologized age of the Wild West, revealing a history no less fierce and fantastical. 8 pages of color photographs; 65 illustrations; map

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Baron, an award-winning journalist, uses exhaustive research to reconstruct a remarkable chapter of U.S. history. He tells the surprising story of how the eclipse spurred three icons of the 19th century—inventor Thomas Edison, planet hunter James Craig Watson, and astronomer and women’s-rights crusader Maria Mitchell—to trek into the wild Western frontier to observe it.” —Lee Billings, *Scientific American*

“The stories of these three enterprising scientists reflect the ambition and intellectual curiosity of the United States in the late-nineteenth-century, when the country was trying to cement its place in the international scientific community.” —Concepción de León, *New York Times Book Review*

“David Baron contracted an incurable case of umbraphilia twenty years ago in Aruba. Fortunately for readers, Baron’s fever stokes his account of the first great American eclipse, in 1878, while priming us for the next one—and the next, and the next.” —Dava Sobel, author of *The Glass Universe*

“David Baron beautifully captures the awe, the magic, and the mystery of one particular eclipse, an event in 1878 that spurred on America to embrace the sciences. A superb contribution to the history of astronomy.” —Marcia Bartusiak, author of *Einstein’s Unfinished Symphony*

“This fascinating portrait of the Gilded Age is suffused with the peculiar magic and sense of awe that have always attended eclipses, those fraught few minutes when day becomes night, time stands still—and anything seems possible.” —Hampton Sides, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Blood and Thunder*

“A suspenseful and dramatic account of the rival scientific expeditions that came to the American West to view and study this rare phenomenon|Baron enables us to

understand what drew them to the eclipse and what this episode tells us about the changing role of science in American culture. — Paul Israel, author of *Edison: A Life of Invention* — “A wonderful book, bringing lessons from the past to the present. In exceptionally clear and interesting prose, Baron brings nineteenth-century personalities to life, showing how men and, unusually, a female astronomy professor of that time observed the total solar eclipse of 1878. — Jay Pasachoff, Field Memorial Professor of Astronomy at Williams College — “Lucidly melds science, ambition, policy, technology, the interplay of personality and practice, and the immediacy of experience. The book is marked by wonderful, eye-opening surprises, notably Edison’s enthusiasm for and participation in the observation of the eclipse and the independent expedition of Maria Mitchell and her crew in the face of their exclusion from the effort. — Daniel Kevles, author of *The Physicists* — “Brilliantly researched and beautifully crafted, *American Eclipse* conveys historical discoveries and scientific obsessions with the verve and excitement of a work of fiction. David Baron’s vivid prose captures the wonder of an era in which modern astronomy was just beginning to reveal our connection to vast universe beyond our own small world. — John Pipkin, author of *The Blind Astronomer’s Daughter* — “Science journalist Baron shares a timely tale of science and suspense in this story of rival Gilded Age astronomers contending with everything from cloudy skies to train robbers to overserve the historic total solar eclipse of July 29, 1878. . . . Baron skillfully builds tension, giving readers a vivid sense of the excitement, hard work, and high stakes in play. With the first total solar eclipse to cross the U.S. in 99 years set to occur in late August 2017, this engrossing story makes an entertaining and informative teaser. — Publishers Weekly, starred review — “Baron mingles the excitement, aspiration and drama of these events with a good dose of technical information and scientific history. Archival photos, sketches and prints are scattered throughout the pages. This is a wonderful, dramatic piece of scientific history, and a fine companion for eclipses to come. — Sara Catterall, Shelf Awareness

David Baron, an award-winning journalist, is a former science correspondent for NPR and former science editor for the public radio program *The World*. An incurable umbraphile whose passion for chasing eclipses began in 1998, he lives in Boulder, Colorado.

A thoroughly enjoyable read, well-researched, well-written, and engaging on many levels. I particularly enjoyed the prominence given Vassar Professor of Astronomy Mariah (Ma-RYE-uh) Mitchell and her expedition. Interspersed with male astronomers, celebrity inventors and scientists,

the history of women in astronomy is given a well-deserved prominence with appreciation of their travails and accomplishments. This one will be re-read and is a rich source of historical references.

Love it since it was bought about a week before the eclipse at a lecture by the author. I bought it hardcopy as well and have his signature in it. A great read before the event!!!

Interesting topic. very readable style.

I won a free copy of this book from Goodreads First Reads. Wonderfully engaging story of the eclipse of 1878 and the scientists who were there watching. Published in preparation for another American occurrence of this phenomenon, the author has witnessed 4 in various points of the globe in various comfort levels and has a deep appreciation for the beauty and specialness of this event that really comes through in the writing. We follow a few leading scientists, an arrogant planet hunter, a woman trying to overcome bias, Thomas Edison and the sagas of their lives and after the eclipse. I literally see the Detroit Observatory that was home base for the planet hunter during this time from my office and had never heard of him nor realized that he is buried somewhere in the cemetery next door. Really neat to learn about Watson this way - as his arrogance led to endowed medals in the sciences. Learned a great deal about science, America and eclipses.

“A total eclipse is a primal, transcendent experience. The shutting off of the sun does not bring utter darkness; it is more like falling through a trapdoor into a dimly lit, unrecognizable reality. The sky is not the sky of the earth - neither the star-filled dome of night nor the immersive blue of daylight, but an ashen ceiling of slate. A few bright stars and planets shine familiarly, like memories from a distant childhood, but the most prominent object is thoroughly foreign. You may know, intellectually, that it is both the sun and moon, yet it looks like neither. It is an ebony pupil surrounded by a pearly iris. It is the eye of the cosmos.”

On the afternoon of July 29, 1878, a highly anticipated total eclipse of the sun would occur in the western United States. The total eclipse would be visible only within a relatively narrow slice of land running from Wyoming to Texas. Astronomers from across the nation and from Europe as well would flock to the region in an effort to solve a number of longstanding riddles about the sun and solar system. David Baron is an award-winning journalist and a former science correspondent for NPR. He chronicles these dramatic and colorful events in his entertaining new book “American Eclipse: A Nation’s Epic Race to Catch the

Shadow of the Moon and Win the Glory of the World. As you will quickly discover there was an awful lot at stake on that July afternoon nearly 140 years ago. Most historians would probably agree that as America celebrated its Centennial in 1876 it could boast precious little in the way of actual scientific achievement. With all of the hoopla surrounding the forthcoming total eclipse of the sun this was about to change. In "American Eclipse" David Baron focuses in on three key players who would dramatically change the landscape and promote the study of the sciences in our nation. You will meet a very interesting character named James Craig Watson, a renowned asteroid hunter who aspired to become a Gilded Age Galileo. Then there was Vassar College astronomy professor Maria Mitchell who would use the occasion to proselytize that science and higher education and femininity were not mutually exclusive. For Mitchell, social change and not pure science was her primary objective. Then there was irrepressible Thomas Alva Edison who by the age of 30 already held more than 100 patents. Edison agreed to join an amateur astronomer named Henry Draper in a small private eclipse expedition to Wyoming to test out yet another new invention he dubbed the "tasimeter". You will also be introduced to the man generally considered to be our nation's first meteorologist. Cleveland Abbe was charged with the unenviable task of determining which locations within the 100 mile wide "path of totality" had the best odds of favorable weather conditions on the afternoon of July 29, 1878. Needless to say, there was an awful lot riding on Abbe's forecasts for that day. Although I am not much of a science buff I am pleased to report that I simply could not put "American Eclipse" down. There are so many facets to this compelling saga. For those who made the trek out west there were numerous obstacles that would require courage, tenacity and ingenuity to overcome. You will come to admire many of the individuals Baron discusses in this book. A total eclipse of the sun is a life changing experience for those lucky enough to experience one. As a result of these historic events American science took a huge step forward that day. Kudos to David Baron who does a superb job in making this story come alive for his readers. I found "American Eclipse" to be a meticulously researched and extremely well-written book that is well worth your time and attention. Very highly recommended!

As an amateur astronomer and an amateur historian myself, I was fascinated by this book on multiple levels. Particularly interesting to me were the descriptions of the preparations and anxieties each group of astronomers faced as the 1878 eclipse approached. These same preparations and anxieties are being felt just as strongly today as we await August 21st and what has been dubbed

the "Great American Eclipse". The tools of the hunt may have changed, but the quarry remains equally as elusive. What if, after traveling hundreds of miles, we're clouded in? What if a shutter fails to trip? Successful writers of history are able to connect the present with the past. David Baron has definitely accomplished this task.

This book is the history and guide about how Americans have observed eclipses. Detail and accounts of past events and observations are included. Instruction on how to safely view an Eclipse are contained. The Eclipse of 2017 is crossing the United States. A rare and awesome opportunity to observe this celestial event.

A delightful account of the national experience of the Eclipse of 1878, and timely as the United States prepares for the Eclipse of 2017. Very enjoyable and excellent study of an important Gilded Age event that tells us much about the American experience in the 1870s. The extensive research is well-balanced with accessible prose that reads like a novel. Historical figures such as Thomas Edison and Maria Mitchell come alive with a personality that is not always apparent in other historical accounts. This is an excellent addition to the history of American science and of the Gilded Age in the US.

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