Women in Space: Following Valentina
by David J Shayler and Ian Moule,

Women are now most definitely in space, on much the same terms as any other humans, but it was not always so: for the first decades of the Space Age, women were not considered fit to be astronauts. The sluggish progress towards selecting the best person for this especially demanding job is documented in this valuable book by David Shayler and Ian Moule.

The authors set out to establish the role that women played in aviation, as a precursor to space flight. They document female pioneers of flight as well as those who made it into space, starting with the flight of Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova in 1963. The accounts of the determination and dedication of women in the 20 years after Tereshkova’s flight are sagas of tough talented women facing half-hearted initiatives, cancelled programmes and false starts. In addition, there were the usual concerns in the press and, it appears, among those in charge of the US space programme, that it would be terribly grubby in a spacecraft and girls might not like it, however much they might say that they would. It is ironic that the few medical tests carried out on women showed that they had a lot to offer the space programme, being in general smaller, lighter and, it turned out, better able to endure some aspects of spaceflight than the men tested. However, women were not part of the US astronaut programme until the Space Shuttle. Some of the reasons given for this exclusion are fair, but in the main they come down to the cost of making different spacesuits – in other words, that old chestnut that women can’t do this job because we can’t afford to put in suitable toilets.

Spacecraft, society and toilets had moved on by the time of the Shuttle programme and women began to take their places among the astronauts, first as mission specialists and later as pilots and commander. In 1982 Svetlana Saviskaya flew to Salyut 7 and in 1983 Sally Ride became the first American woman in space, on the Space Shuttle. Now 35 women have flown into space, mostly on the Shuttle, and the gender mix of crews is scarcely a matter for comment, except among those who persist in wondering why, given that women can’t park a car, how NASA expects one to land that great big Shuttle?

This is a fascinating book that introduced me to many outstanding and extraordinarily patient women, who achieved so much and yet so much less than they wanted. But I found the second half of the book considerably less satisfying than the first, for the authors persist in detailing the achievements of the modern era of female astronauts to such an extent that it gives the impression of surprise that these highly trained, experienced and talented women managed so well. It is clear from comments quoted here and elsewhere that most women in space considered themselves astronauts, not women astronauts, and that they would prefer to think that they were in space as a result of their particular skills and abilities rather than as special cases.

Also listed in this text are some of the many women associated with the space programme other than as astronauts. This is a laudable attempt to record the work of engineers, researchers, machinists and others who were part of the enormous pyramid of effort that let the astronauts fly. They too had their skills belittled, used and occasionally recognized. I was especially impressed by the outreach work of Nichol Nichol – Lieutenant Uhuru in Star Trek. She achieved significant and lasting influence for her belief that America’s space programme must include all Americans, not just the white male ones – although her prominence in astronaut recruitment and the naming of the first shuttle Enterprise might have blurred the already fuzzy boundary between science fact and fiction in the public eye.

This book provides a valuable history of the long years of women’s rejection from national efforts in the space race. But the women astronauts now do not need special treatment. I don’t think it worthy of comment that women are astronauts, now. The decades of dismissal by space authorities and the tremendous efforts made by their predecessors to reach space deserve to be known to a wider audience. I hope that this book will help to provide one.

Sue Bowler