

# LESSON 2

## WHO MAKES HISTORY?

The way the past is presented—or not presented—affects how people think of their own capabilities. Here, using a Bertolt Brecht poem, students begin to consider the active, creative role that workers have played in the past and their potential strength in the future.

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will be able to understand better the choices that historians make in writing history.
2. Students will develop an appreciation for the role of the ordinary people behind great historical events.

### Materials Needed

- **Student Handout #2: A Worker Reads History.**

### Time Required

- One class period.

### Procedure

1. Have students number 1 through 10 on a sheet of paper.
  - In general, what kinds of things make people famous in U.S. history?
2. Tell students to write a list of the ten “most famous” people in the history of the United States.
  - Are there *other* people who should get recognition for participating in the same events as the “famous people”?
3. After they have finished, ask a few of them to share their lists. As someone suggests a name, have him/her say briefly why that person was selected.
  - Are there other categories of people in history who have done very important things but who have not received as much credit as the “famous” people?
4. Have all the students look over their lists. Ask them if they can make any generalizations about what the people they named have in common—e.g., are they mostly men? are there many presidents, athletes, explorers, or movie stars on the lists?
5. Discuss with students what type of accomplishment made each of the people on the lists famous.
  - 6. Distribute **Student Handout #2: A Worker Reads History** by Bertolt Brecht. Read the poem aloud with the class.
  - 7. Initiate a class discussion based on the following questions:
    - Who does the poet feel gets most of the credit in the history books?
    - Who else does he feel are the really impor-

tant people in history? What makes them important?

- Do you agree?
  - Why doesn't history normally focus on workers and "common" people?
  - How many working people did you include on your list?
8. Tell students that they are going to write a poem modeled after Brecht's search for the other unheralded people in history. Ask them to list a number of things in their daily lives in which the people who do or did the work are "hidden." For example, a baseball, a television program, a piece of fruit or a record album each represents a great deal of

human labor, which we don't usually see. Or they might think of jobs with which they are familiar—bakeries, janitorial or secretarial work, food preparation—that are isolated from the ultimate consumers.

After students have completed their lists, have them write a poem using the themes in Brecht's "A Worker Reads History." As a prompt, you might suggest they begin with a question as Brecht does. Recall that in the **Introduction** we mentioned one student who wrote about Mr. Ruffle's workers and their relationship to the owner. You might want to share the excerpt from this student's poem with your class to provoke more ideas.

# STUDENT HANDOUT #2



## A WORKER READS HISTORY

by Bertolt Brecht

Who built the seven towers of Thebes?  
The books are filled with names of kings.  
Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?  
And Babylon, so many times destroyed,  
Who built the city up each time? In which of Lima's houses,  
That city glittering with gold, lived those who built it?  
In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished  
Where did the masons go? Imperial Rome  
Is full of arcs of triumph. Who reared them up? Over whom  
Did the Caesars triumph? Byzantium lives in song,  
Were all her dwellings palaces? And even in Atlantis of the legend  
The night the sea rushed in,  
The drowning men still bellowed for their slaves.

Young Alexander plundered India.  
He alone?  
Caesar beat the Gauls.  
Was there not even a cook in his army?  
Philip of Spain wept as his fleet  
Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?  
Frederick the Great triumphed in the Seven Years War. Who  
Triumphed with him?

Each page a victory,  
At whose expense the victory ball?  
Every ten years a great man,  
Who paid the piper?

So many particulars.  
So many questions.

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