



## A People's History of Science: Miners, Midwives, and Low Mechanics

By Clifford D. Conner

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We all know the history of science that we learned from grade school textbooks: How Galileo used his telescope to show that the earth was not the center of the universe; how Newton divined gravity from the falling apple; how Einstein unlocked the mysteries of time and space with a simple equation. This history is made up of long periods of ignorance and confusion, punctuated once an age by a brilliant thinker who puts it all together. These few tower over the ordinary mass of people, and in the traditional account, it is to them that we owe science in its entirety. This belief is wrong. A People's History of Science shows how ordinary people participate in creating science and have done so throughout history. It documents how the development of science has affected ordinary people, and how ordinary people perceived that development. It would be wrong to claim that the formulation of quantum theory or the structure of DNA can be credited directly to artisans or peasants, but if modern science is likened to a skyscraper, then those twentieth-century triumphs are the sophisticated filigrees at its pinnacle that are supported by the massive foundation created by the rest of us.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this persuasive history, Conner aggressively pursues evidence of how, since the earliest civilizations, elite scientists have suppressed and excluded lower class innovators while learning from and using their discoveries, often without giving them credit. As Conner notes, many of the "Great Man" myths about people like Galileo and Columbus, once believed to have made their contributions to science out of their own genius, have been debunked, but even those persist in the popular imagination, and others have never been addressed. The pages are dense with information and quotes from both primary sources and modern revisionist historians, and Conner tries to cover too much in too little space, but he writes clearly and skillfully shows connections as he ranges across time periods and disciplines from medicine to art to astronomy. However, despite promising to highlight women's important role in the sciences, they are mostly absent, and the brief chapter on modern times mostly concerns itself with corruption in the pharmaceuticals and atomic weaponry industries. Nonetheless, this book is a valuable synthesis of previously spotty attempts to show science's reliance on the anonymous multitudes for many important advances.

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From [Booklist](#)

Explicitly emulating Howard Zinn's enduringly popular *A People's History of the United States* (1979), Conner applies an anti-elitist point of view in his survey of science from prehistory to the present. Conner is not as occupied with scientific ideas and discoveries as he is with the sociology and historiography of science. He is keen to oppose the inculcation of admiration for the Great Men of Science--words he capitalizes in disparagement--but since science historians of socialist bent have preceded him in this iconoclastic project, Conner acknowledges that his work is something of a synthesis. That will be valuable for bringing specialist literature to general readers, who will imbibe Conner's contention that manual workers, tradesmen, and craftsmen, through a trial-and-error process, created the empirical basis for the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. In Conner's collectivist framework, names associated with the experimental method, such as Francis Bacon and Robert Boyle, are like copyright pirates; and the notion of the individual genius-scientist is illusory. With a stout left-wing attitude, Conner's tome will instigate debate. *Gilbert Taylor*

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About the Author

**Clifford D. Conner** teaches at John Jay School of Criminal Law in New York. His previous writings on the era of the French Revolution include a biography of Jean-Paul Marat.

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