

Unsung Women of History

"Well-behaved women seldom make history."
— Laurel Thatcher Ulrich



1. Work with a partner. In one minute, write down as many famous women from history as possible. The pair with the most names wins.



2. Discuss the following in pairs or small groups.

- Have you ever done something important and somebody else got the credit?
- Why do some people become legends while others disappear from history?
- Who decides who is remembered by history?
- Which woman from history deserves more recognition?
- Which field do you think women have influenced the most: science, politics, medicine, sport, business, or art?
- Who is the most famous woman in the world today?
- In 100 years, which women alive today will still be remembered?





3. Complete the quiz. Then compare your answers as a class and see who knows the most about women in history.

1. Which woman ruled Egypt as a pharaoh over 3,500 years ago? a) Cleopatra b) Hatshepsut c) Nefertiti	2. Which woman is often called the world's first computer programmer? a) Ada Lovelace b) Marie Curie c) Grace Hopper
3. Which prime minister gave birth while in office? a) Angela Merkel b) Jacinda Ardern c) Margaret Thatcher	4. Who was the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean? a) Valentina Tereshkova b) Bessie Coleman c) Amelia Earhart
5. Which woman helped calculate the flight path that took astronauts to the Moon? a) Rosalind Franklin b) Katherine Johnson c) Sally Ride	6. Which woman became the first person to win Nobel Prizes in two different sciences? a) Rosalind Franklin b) Marie Curie c) Dorothy Hodgkin
7. Which woman became the first female prime minister in the world? a) Indira Gandhi b) Golda Meir c) Sirimavo Bandaranaike	8. Which woman survived a plane crash in the Amazon rainforest and walked through the jungle alone for 11 days? a) Gertrude Bell b) Junko Tabai c) Juliane Koepcke
9. Which woman led an army against the English during the Hundred Years' War? a) Joan of Arc b) Boudica c) Catherine the Great	10. Which woman was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her fight for girls' education? a) Malala Yousafzai b) Aung San Suu Kyi c) Wangari Maathai



4. Work in pairs or groups of three. Each student reads a different story. Then take turns summarising your story to your partner or group.

Ching Shih: The Pirate Who Defeated Empires

When Ching Shih first appeared in historical records, she was working on a floating brothel in southern China. Her life changed when she married a pirate captain and joined one of the most feared pirate fleets in Asia. When her husband died unexpectedly in 1807, everyone assumed the pirate empire would collapse. Instead, the fleet was taken over by Ching Shih.

More than 70,000 pirates were eventually placed under her command, and hundreds of ships were controlled by her fleet, making it one of the largest pirate organisations in history. Entire villages were raided, and merchants were forced to pay protection money. However, Ching Shih's greatest weapon wasn't violence – it was organisation. Strict laws were introduced, and pirates could be executed for stealing from villagers, disobeying orders, or hiding treasure. One pirate was reportedly beheaded for leaving his ship without permission.



The Chinese government tried to stop her. It failed. The Portuguese navy was sent after her. It failed too. Eventually, something extraordinary happened. Instead of being captured, Ching Shih was offered a pardon. She accepted, kept her fortune, opened a gambling house, and retired peacefully. Most pirates were hunted down and executed. Ching Shih died wealthy and free.

Boudica: The Warrior Queen

In the first century AD, Britain was ruled by the Roman Empire. When Boudica's husband died, his kingdom was seized by the Romans. Boudica was publicly whipped, and her daughters were raped by Roman soldiers. The message was clear: resistance would not be tolerated.

The Romans made a huge mistake.

Instead of being broken, Boudica united several Celtic tribes and raised an enormous army. Roman settlements were attacked, and entire cities were burned to the ground. Londinium, now known as London, was almost completely destroyed. Historians estimate that around 70,000–80,000 Romans and Roman supporters were killed during the rebellion. Panic spread throughout Roman Britain, and some Roman leaders feared that the province might be lost forever.

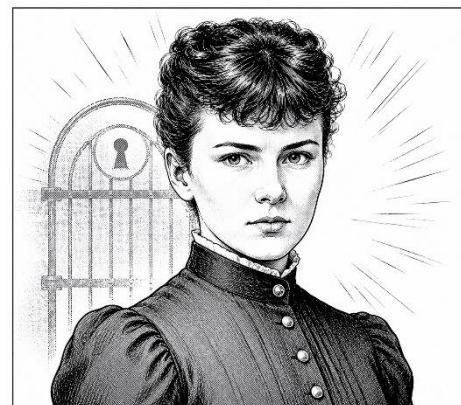


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Eventually, a final battle was fought. Although Boudica's army greatly outnumbered the Romans, it was defeated by a smaller but highly trained Roman force. What happened next remains a mystery. According to ancient sources, poison may have been taken to avoid capture. Nearly 2,000 years later, traces of the destruction caused by her rebellion can still be found beneath the streets of London.

Nellie Bly: The Undercover Reporter

In 1887, journalist Nellie Bly wanted to investigate reports of abuse inside a mental institution in New York. There was just one problem: journalists were not allowed inside. Instead of giving up, Nellie came up with a daring plan. She pretended to be mentally ill.



Her performance was so convincing that doctors, judges, and police officers were completely fooled. Soon, she was declared insane and committed to the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island. Once inside, the reality was even worse than she had imagined. Ice-cold baths were given to patients regardless of the weather. Thin clothing was provided, even during winter. Rotten food was served, drinking water was often contaminated, and women were forced to sit silently on hard wooden benches for up to fourteen hours a day. Any complaints were ignored, and some patients were beaten by staff members.

Even more disturbing, Nellie discovered that not all the women were mentally ill. Some had simply been poor, unable to speak English, or abandoned by their families. Once admitted, it was almost impossible to leave.

For ten days, Nellie secretly collected information while pretending to be a patient. After her release, her findings were published, and the public was horrified. Investigations were launched, additional funding was provided, and major reforms were introduced. A few years later, Nellie also became famous for travelling around the world in just 72 days, breaking a world record.



5. In the same pairs or groups, discuss the questions below.

- Had you heard of any of these women before today?
- Which woman do you admire the most? Why?
- Which woman had the greatest impact on history?
- Which story would make the best film? Why?



6. You are going to watch a TED Talk. Match the vocabulary from the video to its meaning.

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| a. breakthrough | 1. A major discovery or achievement that helps people understand or do something new. |
| b. contribution | 2. Not given the attention, credit, or recognition that someone deserves. |
| c. manuscript | 3. A piece of writing submitted for publication. |
| d. overlooked | 4. Disagreed or argued strongly with someone. |
| e. clashed | 5. Something that a person does, gives, or creates to help achieve a result. |
| f. posthumously | 6. Happening after someone's death. |



7. Before you watch the video, discuss the following as a class.

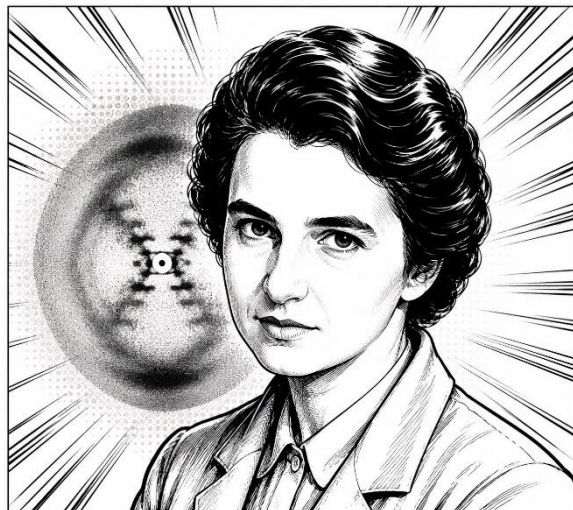
- Have you heard of Rosalind Franklin? If so, what do you know about her?
- Do you think important discoveries are always credited to the right people?



8. Watch the TED Talk¹ *Rosalind Franklin: DNA's Unsung Hero*, and complete the following tasks.

a. True, False, or Not Mentioned?

1. Rosalind Franklin wanted to become a scientist from her teenage years.
2. Maurice Wilkins understood that Franklin had been hired as an independent researcher.
3. Franklin had already worked with X-ray techniques before joining King's College.
4. Producing Photo 51 took approximately 100 hours.
5. The journal published Franklin's manuscript before Watson and Crick's manuscript.
6. The video explains what type of cancer Franklin had.



¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIP0IYrdIrI>

b. Who Did What? Match the people to their contributions.

People

1. Rosalind Franklin
2. Maurice Wilkins
3. James Watson & Francis Crick

Contributions

- a. Built a model of DNA's structure.
- b. Produced Photo 51 and carried out the calculations.
- c. Shared Photo 51 without permission.

c. Work in pairs or small groups. Do you think Photo 51 should have been shared without Rosalind Franklin's permission? Why or why not?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

Explain your answer.

d. Imagine you are a member of the Nobel Prize Committee.

Award the medals. 🏆 Gold 🥈 Silver 🥉 Bronze

You may award the same medal to more than one person.

- Rosalind Franklin
- Maurice Wilkins
- James Watson
- Francis Crick

Explain your choices.

e. Imagine Rosalind Franklin had received the same recognition as Watson and Crick during her lifetime. How might her life or career have been different?



9. Optional Homework: Research a woman who changed history but was not mentioned in today's lesson and prepare a one-minute presentation for the next lesson.