

Frances M. Clarke and Rebecca Jo Plant. *Of Age: Boy Soldiers and Military Power in the Civil War Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. xiv + 434 pages. Hardcover, \$34.95.

Of Age: Boy Soldiers and Military Power in the Civil War Era examines the important topic of underage soldiers in the Union and Confederate armies. Historians Francis M. Clarke and Rebecca Jo Plant both bring considerable expertise to this study each having published earlier works related to the Civil War era. In this current piece, the authors explain the history of the nation's changing view of the appropriate age for military service and illuminate the underlying debate about authority over the labor and lives of young men that developed during the Civil War. The authors make it clear that widespread underage service affected tens of thousands of young men and families. They convincingly argue that the practice of underage recruitment brought growing Federal power into direct conflict with the traditional authority and sanctity of the home, a potent symbol of the transformative nature of the Civil War.

The authors begin their study with a solid, concise examination of policies and practices regarding minor enlistment in the early nineteenth century, a time when broad suspicion of standing armies and the threats they might pose to liberty lingered from the revolutionary period. Enlistment was mostly restricted to men who were at least 21 years old. There were widespread public assumptions about the limitations of younger teenagers serving as soldiers. Even medical research, some produced by Army doctors, argued against minor recruitment pointing to the frailty of still-developing skeletal, muscular and digestive systems. The pressing need for soldiers during the Civil War began to change these perceptions.

The authors argue that once President Lincoln called for volunteers after the attack on Fort Sumter, several factors eroded opposition to recruiting younger men for service. A particularly interesting chapter titled "Pride of the Nation" examines children's literature and magazine illustrations depicting heroic minors in uniform. The image of the Union drummer boy

was a particularly poignant and enduring icon of the righteousness of the cause. While it is impossible to estimate how many teens were influenced by these images, it is clear that they made northern readers more accustomed to the notion of underage service, at least in the abstract.

The authors find that some teens enlisted because they wanted to follow older brothers or friends who were already in the Army. In the South in particular, boys who remained behind to attend school confronted daily reminders that older classmates had already stepped up to serve. School leaders often celebrated the war cause and introduced basic military drill as part of the day, all contributing to the allure of service for students. Younger men and teenagers were also subject to the predatory practice of hiring draft substitutes who would serve in the place of typically wealthier members of society. The Confederate Congress ended the practice in 1863 after overwhelming protests from parents. Finally, the growing Federal need for soldiers led recruiters to overlook suspicions about young enlistees' actual ages and created limitless opportunities to enter the Union army.

The main findings of the authors are connected to clashes between Federal authority and parents as they tried to retrieve sons who had enlisted without permission and the rapid changes in nation's dual military structure, which had included a small Federal level force and state and local militias. Parents out of affection and also a traditional belief that they were entitled to the labor of their children until they turned 21, made thousands of direct pleas to officers and even Secretary of War Stanton to release their underage sons. Early in the war, after General Order No. 73 ended the consideration of discharge petitions for minors, parents turned to habeas corpus petitions primarily in local and state courts before all petitions were judged and usually rejected at the Federal level. By mid-September, 1863, the president suspended habeas corpus

nationwide, in part because of the overwhelming number of such petitions from parents. The authors effectively argue that this concentration of power at the Federal level at the expense of parental over rights to their children is one of the major changes connected to the war. The massive recruitment efforts of the Union army also permanently lessened the importance of local and state militia.

The authors use an interesting and compelling combination of sources to study the phenomenon of young men enlisting without their parents' consent, with the most reliable numbers from Union sources. Recruitment rosters, regimental histories, censuses, and pension applications provide opportunities to approximate the ages at which soldiers enlisted. Clarke and Plant clearly explain their methodology in two well-written appendices. In one precise regimental study, they find that 8.7 percent of recruits were underage, while a smaller unit-sized sample puts the number at 13.5 percent. They also effectively use the "Early Indicators of Later Work Levels, Disease, and Death" database, which includes data on 39,000 White soldiers and 21,000 Black U.S.C.T. soldiers. This source broadens their sample and confirms that many young men who claimed to be 18 at the time of the enlistment were actually younger. Using the most reliable data available on the Confederate army, the authors conclude that underage recruitment was no more common in the Southern forces than in the Union army. Indeed, they find that because the Confederate government never initiated restrictions on recruits under 18 who had parental consent, there were many fewer efforts by parents to retrieve their sons out of the military.

Of Age is a valuable work on an understudied topic, interesting for anyone concerned with the intersections between the military and society in the Civil War. Its clear writing and helpful chapter summaries help reinforce the authors' central points about how the scale of the

conflict led to a transformation of the relationship between the military and families and how the reliance on underage soldiers changed society's expectations of youth.

Creston Long, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of History
Salisbury University
Salisbury, Maryland