

Age in America: The Colonial Era to the Present, edited by Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett. New York: New York University Press, 2015. Pp. 352. \$28 (paperback).

Reviewed by Evan C. Rothera, Sam Houston State University (ecr036@shsu.edu)

As Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett observe, specific ages—sixteen, eighteen, and sixty-five—mark “precise moments when our rights, opportunities, and civic engagement change” (1). Broadly speaking, *Age in America* has three goals. First, to explore why specific ages, such as those cited above, are invested with significance. Second, to demonstrate that age has, throughout American history, always mattered. The authors argue, in contrast to many historians, that age was not a meaningless category of identity for early Americans. Third, to encourage scholars, to understand age as a key axis of identity.

The book is divided into three parts. Part one examines age in Early America and contains essays by Ann M. Little and Sharon Braslaw Sundue. Little offers an excellent discussion of age and captivity in North American colonial borderlands. She analyzes three groups of children: one- to four-year-olds; six- and seven-year-olds; and twelve- to fourteen-year-olds. She successfully demonstrates how three different groups of people—English colonists, French colonists, and the Wabanaki—shared ideas about “how children of different specific ages might be treated as war captives, regarded as religious converts, and categorized as subjects of civil law” (24). Borderlands historians have written a great deal about captivity and warfare, but Little reminds scholars that such discussions must take children into account as both actors and agents.

Sundue’s essay explores the social implications of Pennsylvania’s gradual emancipation law that mandated legal servitude until age twenty-eight for African Americans. This law reflected widespread white presumptions that childlike traits persisted in African Americans much longer than in white people. Consequently, white lawmakers saw no problem prescribing longer periods of dependence. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society challenged the presumption that African Americans were not entitled to legal independence,

but they swam “against a tide of attitudes presuming that African Americans were less mature” (62). Sundue makes an important contribution to the history of early abolitionism by emphasizing the tangled web of ideas about childhood, dependence, and slavery. Both Little and Sundue offer avenues for future research, specifically in the relationship between age and different forms of captivity and unfree labor.

Part two covers age in the long Nineteenth Century and contains essays by Corinne T. Field, Jon Grinspan, Nicholas L. Syrett, Shane Landrum, James D. Schmidt, and Yuki Oda. Field, Grinspan, and Syrett offer complementary discussions of the importance of age twenty-one in the nineteenth century United States. Field opens with an account of how Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued before the New York State Constitutional Convention in 1867 for women’s suffrage. Horace Greeley challenged their argument that voting was an inalienable right by mentioning how states set age and residency requirements. Greeley knew, Field contends, “that he could count on Anthony to concede that even if age twenty-one was an arbitrary distinction between citizens, some age qualifications were necessary” (69). Twenty-one was indeed an artificial barrier, but, as Grinspan illustrates, that did not make it unimportant. When men turned twenty-one, “they celebrated a clear step into adulthood,” and “this political rite of passage helped make chronological age seem progressive and triumphant to otherwise drifting youth” (86). Women, on the other hand, had no satisfying transition at age twenty-one because they could not vote. While women did not have had anything to celebrate at twenty-one, Syrett suggests that they had an occasion to mark at eighteen. In 1850, the California legislature passed a statute mandating that men could marry at twenty-one and women at eighteen. As Syrett astutely observes, the lower age standard “allowed girls to make adult-like decisions and gain some privileges before boys” (104). Laws could upend a legal order favoring men and become a “legal tool that girls could manipulate to their own ends” (118). Taken together, these three essays interrogate the importance of people’s twenty-first birthday and highlight reasons when people still invest twenty-one with such importance, even though the voting age has been lowered to eighteen. One

avenue for further research, which Grinspan raises, is why people started to deemphasize the importance of the twenty-first birthday, a phenomenon which occurred before the lowering of the voting age.

The remaining essays in part two examine the ages of children. Landrum argues that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century public health and child welfare movements caused people to reject privately-kept records of their ages and embrace the idea that everyone needed access to government-issued proof of age. Schmidt's essay complements this discussion and argues that "child labor reform contributed centrally to the creation of chronological age consciousness" (151). Oda examines the role of age in restricting Southern and Eastern European immigrants and excluding Chinese immigrants. These essays skillfully use age as a way to explore some of the contours of the modern world, particularly the increasing reliance on government to keep track of aspects of people's lives.

Part three discusses age in Modern America and contains essays by William Graebner, Rebecca de Schweinitz, Timothy Cole, Stuart Schoenfeld, Norma E. Cantú, and W. Andrew Achenbaum. Graebner argues chronological age became a dominant factor in retirement only in the 1930s because the federal government used chronological age in the Social Security Act. De Schweinitz explores how, for many people, high school graduation became the most identifiable symbol of growing up. Therefore, it made sense to let eighteen - twenty-year-olds vote. Schoenfeld argues that adolescence is critical in the modern Jewish life cycle and that bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies reflect folk custom. Cantú analyzes quinceañeras and cincuentañeras to discuss shifts signaled by age and how both celebrations include similar elements. Achenbaum wonders whether we should re-think age-based criteria, which once shaped policies but now have "proven too imperfect to sustain as policy makers confront a new set of ideological and budgetary challenges" (315). Cole's essay, the weakest in the volume, discusses drinking laws. He contends that these laws "have never served solely as a means of preventing drunk driving accidents, or of protecting vulnerable children and youth" (239), but rather as a means of social control. His unpersuasive argument is based on a faulty

reading of some of his evidence. This part of the book is uneven; unlike the first two parts, the essays feels like they talk around rather than talk with each other.

In sum, Field and Syrett have successfully assembled a lively set of essays that have a great deal to say about age and the process of aging throughout U.S. history. Some of these essays would work very well in graduate seminars and most of them, as outlined above, raise ideas and themes that merit additional research.