the papers provide such rich raw materials the many more new books will follow.

David Head is a lecturer of history at the University of Central Florida. In 2016 he was the Amanda and Greg Gregory Family Fellow at the Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington at Mount Vernon. He is writing a book on the Newburgh Conspiracy.


Reviewed by John A. Ruddiman

Soldiering, according to early modern expectations, was a man’s work. Military service required strength and endurance. Armies consequently had little use for boys. In the Revolutionary War, Congress and the rebellious states set sixteen as an age limit for their recruiters and draft policies. Nevertheless, Caroline Cox has identified hundreds of boys who joined regiments fighting for American independence. Most of these boys were between thirteen and fifteen years old, but some were as young as nine. She estimates that 1.5 to 2.5 percent of Continental soldiers were younger than sixteen. Cox’s work opens windows into the diversity of experiences in the Revolutionary War and the relationship between soldiering and work. Ultimately, her analysis of boy soldiers highlights changing expectations about children and childhood as one century flowed into the next.

Cox’s book rests on exhaustive investigation of nineteenth-century pension applications, read in combination with memoirs and military records. Congress offered pensions to indigent veterans of the Revolution in 1818 and expanded eligibility in 1832 to all who served at least nine months. The resulting 80,000 application records—now digitized, but only organized alphabetically by last name—are a rich mine. These records impose real limits, however. Details can be scant and memories faulty, and these aged veterans faced audiences who possessed far different understandings of the war and soldiering. Cox acknowledges that pension applications could be self-serving, prone to error or deceit, and layered with shifting meanings. But she correctly points out that applicants did not lie about information incidental to their application—the
stories of families and relationships that prove central to her analysis. Cox’s study benefited from the transformation of expectations about childhood in this era. James Edwards, the War Department administrator of the pension system, was eager to root out fraud and often demanded why these men had entered service as boys when “no law required it?” (18). As a veteran of the War of 1812, he had no memory of boys standing in the ranks in that conflict. His questioning—and rejection—of applications produced additional explanations, evidence, and stories. Thanks to Cox’s imagination and her efforts digging for corroborating evidence, these pension files reveal a great deal. Her analysis valuably builds on John Resch’s foundational work *Suffering Soldiers: Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment, and Political Culture in the Early Republic* (Amherst, MA, 1999).

Across her book, Cox focuses on how work, relationships, and substitution shaped boys’ wartime experiences. Each chapter opens with a terse transcription of a boy-soldier’s nineteenth-century pension application. Cox then profitably shifts towards storytelling, stating, “Perhaps it was like this . . .” (3). These imaginative passages ring true as they recreate context, combine surviving evidence, and suggest deeper meanings. Her first chapter sets up the changing conditions and expectations boys faced in early modern armies, drawing comparisons among British, French, Prussian, and American armies. Her attention to the grinding labor required in an army camp offers a powerful counterpoint to battle-centered soldier stories. Cox’s second chapter turns to the “pull factors” of culture and psychology that enticed boys into military service in the revolution. Reading sermons, books, songs, and games, she is particularly attentive to the ideals of manhood that boys wished to emulate. Chapter 3 turns to “push factors” such as unstable homes and economic desperation that sent boys to the army. Here, Cox’s boy soldiers offer insight into the lives of profoundly unfortunate, and otherwise invisible, children. Chapter 4 combines the pull/push themes of the prior chapters by focusing on substitution, where boys took the place of drafted men, as an institution and experience. The final chapter considers the surviving boys as veterans, and Cox weighs the personal and political implications embedded in their applications for pensions.

This compact book is full of valuable findings and striking insights. Cox uses boy soldiers to highlight how the Revolutionary War was different from earlier colonial military mobilizations. The passions of home
defense merged with new political language. Enlistment bounties collided with economic upheaval. Cox is particularly attentive to comparisons across nation, region, and race. For example, though black men were readily found in the Continental ranks, black boys were rare. She explains this in terms of the limited social connections available to black children. White boys, by contrast, were not severed from their families or communities when they entered the ranks; those connections persisted in the army. Burdened by extreme poverty or enslavement, black soldiers could not bring sons or younger kin into the ranks with them.

Ultimately, Cox sees these boy soldiers and veterans as part of the transformation of childhood in the early nineteenth century and early republic. Norms were changing surrounding work, education, and poor relief. Soldiering also changed—by the nineteenth century, American armies once again had no place for boys. In the War of 1812, (anti-war) federalists would go so far as to object to a law allowing eighteen-year-olds to enlist without parental consent. Cox’s analysis of the revolution’s boy soldiers extends Holly Brewer’s findings about the transformation of childhood and legal consent in the early modern period.1 During the age of revolution, childhood emerged as a separate legal category; by the nineteenth century, honorable work and respectable citizenship had solidified as provinces of adulthood. The boy soldiers of the Revolutionary War stand within this arc of transformation.

This excellent book is as much about childhood as it is about soldiering. It should be of equal interest to students of early modern armies, the American Revolution, and childhood. Compact and gracefully written, it would work well in undergraduate classrooms—particularly since Cox shines a clear light on her paths through her evidence and analysis.

On a final note, Cox passed away in 2014, dealing a great loss to her family, her colleagues, and our field. Her thought-provoking study deepens our understanding of childhood and military life in the Revolution, opening a window onto “the changing and sometimes contradictory ideas” about who had the capacity and responsibility to serve (24).

John A. Ruddiman is an associate professor at Wake Forest University. He is the author of Becoming Men of Some Consequence: Youth and