Lisa Dillon’s book is a wide-ranging and impressive study circumscribing the meanings of old age and aging in late Victorian Canada and the United States. Using discourse analysis and strong quantitative methodology, including logistic regressions, Dillon presents a powerful picture of the lives of elderly women in the late nineteenth century. Dillon’s book primarily focuses on women and their place within a larger family and social structure using age and specifically old age as a categorical variable to see how aging, and the effects of aging, affect women’s roles in society. Dillon primarily focuses on women over the age of fifty, drawing the majority of the source material from the 1871 and 1901 Canadian and the 1870 and 1900 U.S. censuses.

Dillon opens her book with a careful description of how age was handled as a category by the census enumerators, and the tendency of the respondents to falsify their age to enumerators. The analysis of these responses then leads into a broader discussion of the intersection of age, gender and identity, and the construction of a social category of age and old age in the late nineteenth century. Dillon writes that there were “multiple and contradictory visions of age: aging itself was a problem, representing ‘stagnation’ of the population; aging was an exception; aging was something to be avoided” (p. 132). In her fourth chapter, Dillon discusses the “ambiguity and discontinuity” associated with the lives of elderly women. Victorian women and the assertion of the ethic of domesticity placed women in a state of perpetual dependency. While women did in fact assert independence and own property, the ethos of domesticity radically limited the ability of women to define an age of adulthood, and to assert a measure of social independence. This, Dillon argues, “compromised” the ability of women to have a more positive transition to old age.

Using the vast demographic data now available through the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (provided through the University of Minnesota’s Population Center), Dillon begins to paint a picture of women over the age of sixty. The most notable change for elderly married women, as it was for men, was a decline in the number of dependent children living with the couple. There was however an increase in lodgers and tenants, which likely boosted household income and assured some measure of independence in old age. What marks elderly women in the late nineteenth century is the large proportion of women over the age of sixty-five who were widowed as they entered old age. Women certainly experienced psychological losses associated with a partner’s death, but widowhood aided property holding. This granted elderly women a measure of independence. For elderly men, the advance of age was highly correlated with declines in productive capacity associated with age-related conditions and encroaching physical disabilities. Despite their relative declines in productive capacity, men maintained a relative status as heads of households despite their increasing vulnerability to disabling conditions that increased with age. Married men were also more likely than unmarried men to still be categorized as the head of household at a slightly higher age.

Dillon has provided invaluable demographic and quantitative historical work in broadening the picture of aging and the elderly in the late nineteenth century by trying to reframe social historians’ view of aging as a process. Aging in the late nineteenth century was not
simply a linear process and at times aging was a chaotic process. Dillon contends that the process was marked by the interdependence of families and individuals, resulting in unique social circumstances that affected the outcomes for elderly individuals. The young-old age of elderly individuals who were independent ultimately depended on family size, marital status, etc.

While the details provide a great deal of insight, the book itself is a laborious read with a litany of charts and literature reviews that were difficult even for this economic historian to follow at times. The literary style is at times clunky, but its depth will provide insights for the informed social historian, demographer, and those interested in aging and disability in the late nineteenth century. Much of the methodology and regression tables that are interspersed throughout could have been condensed into an appendix for those who are quantitatively inclined, and allowed for a more effective read.

There are also two minor quibbles from this reviewer on Dillon’s work. The book, while focusing very heavily on the power of descriptive statistics, at times lacks a general theory or framework to discuss the various aspects of aging. Indeed in contemporary analysis there is great difficulty in developing a framework for a discussion of aging. The book would have definitely benefited from integrating Theda Skocpol’s work Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States (1992), to give more nuances to Dillon’s claim of the unique nature of widows and the gendered nature of social policies in the United States. Skocpol suggests that widowhood connoted a status of independence, which would be relinquished if remarried, something that Dillon does not assert in her work. In the case of Civil War widows whose benefits were eliminated through remarriage, many widows may have preferred to remain single instead of losing these benefits.

While this work is not comprehensive, it represents an important addition to the study of aging and demography in the late nineteenth century. The vast amount of quantitative work Dillon has accomplished here is no trifling task and should stimulate a number of interesting works that are sure to come.

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