George F.W. Young. The British Capture and Occupation of Downeast Maine, 1814-
maps (one fold out), appendices, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-0-941238-14-4 $17.95
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Review by John R. Grodzinski

In the United States, the attention given to War of 1812 bicentenary events of national
significance, such as the Battle of Chippawa, the origins of the national anthem at Fort McHenry,
and the naval and land actions at Plattsburgh, has masked other important events of two hundred
years ago. One notable example is the ten month British occupation of a sizeable portion of
Maine—the Territory of Massachusetts as it was then known. British dissatisfaction with the
1783 border between Maine and Lower Canada and New Brunswick, led, to a joint military
intervention in the summer of 1814 that was to correct the boundary.

Although his interest is in European history after Napoleon, George F.W. Young a Professor
Emeritus of St. Mary’s University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, is no stranger to the Anglo-American
War, having presented several papers on it, such as “The Royal Navy, the Raid on Washington,
and the Wreck of the HMS Fantome, 1814.” Another paper Young presented to the War of 1812
symposium in Baltimore inspired this book.

Britain redefined its North American strategy after Napoleon’s abdication. A sizeable
reinforcement dispatched to the Canadas was to secure the frontier from enemy threat, while
operations in the Chesapeake, were to divert American troops from British North America, and
solidify Britain’s position before peace talks to end the war began in Europe. As part of this
strategy, in Nova Scotia, Lieutenant General Sir John Sherbrooke and Rear Admiral Edward
Griffith were to occupy part of Maine. In July 1814, a British naval and land force arrived off Eastport, Maine. After taking possession of Fort Sullivan, the British extended their occupation along the coastline and into Penobscot Bay. British authority was established without challenge and several citizens swore allegiance to the Crown. The occupation only ended in April 1815, following ratification of the Treaty of Ghent, in which both parties abandoned claims to the other’s territory. In Maine, the subsequent political fallout from the occupation brought its statehood five years later.

The closing chapter is devoted to exploring how the citizens of Maine could “so meekly submit themselves to become again British subjects and take an oath of allegiance to the same king, George III, against whom they and their fathers had fought for independence” (p. 89). A perspective of this complex and emotive question—as it includes local opposition to the Madison administration and different views of Maine’s place in the Union—is drawn from contemporaneous letters, official correspondence, period newspapers and secondary literature.

The appendices reproduce British proclamations made during the occupation of the “Country lying between the Penobscot River and the Passamaquoddy Bay” (p. 105), and the text of an 1814 letter addressed to the Honourable John Holmes, a future senator of Maine, regarding British conduct during the occupation of Bangor. The detailed maps and images are crisp, and a fold-out drawing of the Castine Peninsula by Royal Engineer Colonel Gustavus Nicholls is a novel feature in a modern publication.

Dr. Young has provided solid contextual overviews of the political division in the Territory of Massachusetts, the nature of the border dispute with British North America, the course of the occupation, and of American resistance and cooperation with the occupying forces. Given the slight attention given to the Maritime Provinces and Maine during the bicentenary of the War of 1812, a new history of the British occupation is welcome.