



Depredations upon the Coast: British Raiding in the War of 1812

War in the Chesapeake: The British Campaign to Control the Bay, 1813–1814

by Charles Patrick Neimeyer. Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst. Press, 2015. Pp. x, 244. ISBN 978–1–61251–865–7.

The British Raid on Essex: The Forgotten Battle of the War of 1812

by Jerry Roberts. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. x, 197. ISBN 978–0–8195–7476–3.

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Many excellent histories of the War of 1812 were produced for its recent bicentennial. British and American scholars made fresh analyses and delved deeper into the archives. Unsurprisingly, much of this work centered on the fleet and ship battles fought by gallant frigate captains and their crews of upstart Americans or veteran British tars, with due attention to the squadron engagements on Lakes Erie and Champlain. Broad accounts of the war from both sides of the Atlantic included analysis of commerce raiding, as well as convoy and blockade operations by both sides.¹

But there was more to the conflict between Great Britain and its former colonies than is revealed by conventional narratives of ships on the blue waters or wide lakes. In the closing months of the bicentennial, a pair of books added significantly to our understanding of the war by concentrating on the less studied raiding operations along the Atlantic seaboard, particularly when the British achieved relative command of the sea after 1813.

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Control of Chesapeake Bay was critical to British strategic goals before and during the conflict. Beginning with the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair near Cape Charles, the course of the British campaign on the Atlantic seaboard is well known. Squadron patrols with orders from the Admiralty to avoid single-ship engagements after the initial American victories were followed by the militarily successful blockade. The story of the attack on Washington, the attempted assault on Baltimore, and the writing of the *Star-Spangled Banner* lives on, one hopes, in American K-12 curricula.

In *War in the Chesapeake*, historian Charles Neimeyer (Marine Corps Univ.) has gone beyond this highlight-reel narrative. After a chapter providing background on the causes of the war, Neimeyer offers six chapters detailing the British operations on the Bay in 1813–14, and concomitant American defensive efforts. The sources for the work include extensive archives pertinent to both the operational and strategic elements of British movements, but also, laudably, a number of personal accounts that offer a “war from the ground up” view of events.

The expected focal points are all present: Commodore Joshua Barney’s gunboats, the march on Washington and battle at Bladensburg, and the bombs bursting in air over Baltimore. But the British also conducted economic warfare against the populations of Maryland and Virginia, raided the Bay’s cities, and attacked landings, smaller towns, and villages in a show of imperial power.

1. See, e.g., Andrew Lambert, *The Challenge: America, Britain and the War of 1812* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), and George Daughan, *1812: The Navy’s War* (NY: Basic Books, 2011).

The dominant Royal Navy controlled the Chesapeake Bay with a fleet that patrolled from its safe anchorage at Lynnhaven near Norfolk.

American defenders resorted to an asymmetric and irregular defense that capitalized on their knowledge of the shallows and other hazards, but with only mixed results. On the one hand, the British repeatedly torched towns like Hampton and Havre de Grace, looted and devastated plantations and farms, encouraged slave rebellions, and burned the Capitol itself. On the other hand, the Americans successfully defended Norfolk at Craney Island, scored a surprise tactical victory with its gunboats at St. Leonard's Creek, and mounted a hardy defense of Baltimore.

Neimeyer avoids the vitriolic and nationalist tone that has long characterized some narratives of the War of 1812, for instance, those of William James² and Theodore Roosevelt.³ That said, he has nonetheless provided a distinctively American perspective to counterbalance Andrew Lambert's decidedly Anglocentric approach.⁴

Specialist readers may quibble over fine details like Neimeyer's designation of the 38-gun USS *Constellation* as a super-frigate, a label some reserve for the larger 44-gun ships *Constitution*, *President*, and *United States*. Such niggling aside, Neimeyer's lucid narrative and analyses will make his readers reassess the wisdom of the British strategy of integrating command of the sea with raiding operations in the Chesapeake Bay in the face of American asymmetric and irregular tactics.

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Although maritime historian Jerry Roberts examines a narrower subject in his *British Raid on Essex* than Neimeyer does in *War in the Chesapeake*, their books have thematic similarities. In early 1814, as British sailors and marines were raiding farms on the Chesapeake, they also clamped a tight blockade across Long Island Sound and the harbors of New York, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Here, too, the Americans resisted British imperial interference on their shores by resorting to privateering and irregular operations; they had little choice, since Commodore Stephen Decatur's warships were bottled up in port at New London. Responding to these attacks, which included early efforts at undersea warfare using Robert Fulton's torpedoes (sea mines), Commander Richard Coote of HMS *Borer* led a raiding party up the Connecticut River to attack the harbor at Pettipaug, present-day Essex.

Roberts details the mission's tactical execution and the American response. Essex was a challenging target for Coote and his raiders. Six miles upstream from the coast and the big guns of the Royal Navy's warships, it was a busy harbor with shipyards that produced fast schooners to serve as privateers in the war effort. But, after a long night of hard rowing, Coote's ca. 130 sailors and marines seized downtown Essex and the harbor without a fight. With the local militia withdrawn into the woods outside of town and the town's inhabitants looking on, the British burned twenty-seven ships, including several potential privateers, together with the shore facilities and storehouses used to outfit them. Since its inhabitants did not interfere, Coote left the town proper intact. Still, the nearly \$200,000⁵ in damage inflicted made this among the most costly maritime raids of the war (109). The British then had to escape. Roberts details the American rush to close

² *A Full and Correct Account of the Chief Naval Occurrences of the Late War between Great Britain and the United States of America* (London, 1817).

³ *The Naval War of 1812; or, The History of the United States Navy during the Last War with Great Britain* (New York, 1882).

⁴ See note 1 above.

⁵ Equated by Roberts with "tens of millions" in modern dollars (109).

off their route down the Connecticut River and Coote's tactical decision-making, which resulted in the successful retreat to His Majesty's ships waiting across the bar in Long Island Sound.

Roberts, formerly Executive Director of the Connecticut River Museum, tells the story of the Essex raid as only a local historian could, that is, with expert knowledge of the geography and history of the small towns of southern New England. Roberts also had a hand in publicizing the bicentennial of the War of 1812. Readers will learn of his struggle to convince Department of the Navy historians even to admit that the attack on Essex was in fact part of the naval war, as deserving of attention as the battle of Stonington (9–12 Aug. 1814). This will enlighten readers who have any interest in how the public consumes and appreciates history.

The British Raid on Essex is written for the general public; hence, it sometimes plays up as “discoveries” material already in print in standard academic journals like *Mariner's Mirror*. This is forgivable in a book that reminds us that the study of history is always a process of discovery that should engage and instruct the public. Roberts's welcome descriptions of the archeological aspects of his research recall Donald Shomette's fine work on Barney's flotilla.⁶ The book features excellent images and maps throughout; in lieu of conventional sources citations, several appendices helpfully reprint many of the relevant primary sources. In short, Roberts has succeeded admirably in drawing attention to a forgotten moment in the War of 1812 in a narrative that is a joy to read.

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Battles at sea dominate naval history. Even proponents of the “new naval history,” which stresses social, cultural, economic, and political points of view, commonly relate their analyses closely to decisive fleet battles. The two books under review here will demonstrate to students of naval history as well as navy personnel that maritime raids were not merely the stuff of swashbuckling stories, but a crucial element of naval strategy and its political aims.

6. I.e., *Flotilla: The Patuxent Naval Campaign in the War of 1812* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 2009).