The Pig and the Postwar Dream: The San Juan Island Dispute, 1853-1872, in History and Memory

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Abstract:

Historical events are framed by the actors of the time and then re-framed by subsequent historians and the public. This thesis examines the historiography of the San Juan Island Dispute, 1853-1871, known colloquially in the twentieth century as the "Pig War." In 1859, after an American settler on San Juan shot a pig owned by the Hudson’s Bay Company, the American military and the British Royal Navy met in a tense stand-off resulting in a twelve year joint-military occupation of the island. This conflict was the last border dispute between the two nations. Following World War II, a message of peace became the dominant trope of histories written about the "Pig War." The term itself has come to represent this overarching theme. With documents from the dispute, such as colonial despatches, official correspondence and newspaper editorials, this thesis considers how the event was framed at the time; and employing semiotics as a technique for discourse analysis, it examines how the "war" was re-framed in the twentieth century. The thesis follows Alfred Young’s research on antebellum America’s commemoration of the "Boston Tea Party," with its message appropriated by politicians, merging history and myth. The "Pig War" occupies similar terrain as the reconceptualization of the event embodies its own message of a unique identity for the Pacific Northwest, associated with the 49th parallel as the world’s longest, most peaceful, "undefended" border.

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