

RESEARCH NOTE

The Battle of San Juan Island? The Puzzling Account of Private William Henry Royle

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THIS ARTICLE'S TITLE will undoubtedly surprise those historians familiar with the so-called Pig War. The boundary conflict over the San Juan Islands, located between Vancouver Island and Bellingham Bay, emerged after the 1846 Treaty of Oregon's ambiguous wording left unclear whether the United States or Great Britain controlled the archipelago. The islands remained in dispute for over a decade, during which time the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) established a fishery and then a sheep farm on San Juan Island, the most strategically important of the disputed islands. In 1859, American settlers – who originally came to British Columbia during the previous year's gold rush – began establishing claims on San Juan. One June day that year, an American settler shot an HBC pig. Accounts of what ensued differ, but San Juan's American population alleged that HBC officials attempted to arrest the pig's killer. The American settlers petitioned the US Army for protection, and General William S. Harney met their demand, landing troops soon thereafter. James Douglas, the governor of British Columbia and Vancouver Island, responded by sending warships to San Juan, but cooler heads eventually prevailed. American troops allowed a joint occupation by British forces in 1860, an arrangement that continued until an 1872 international arbitration

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granted the United States permanent custody.¹ The conflict's supposed porcine origin inspired the incident's modern name: the Pig War. If the "war" ended without (human) bloodshed, one might reasonably wonder to what the titular "Battle of San Juan Island" refers.

This research note introduces a new source to suggest that armed confrontation *might* have occurred on San Juan following the American occupation. This possible battle was not, however, between the American and British forces but between the US Army and Indigenous Peoples. This new evidence comes from American Private William Henry Royle, who served on San Juan Island during the joint occupation. A collection of the private's letters survives at the Washington State Historical Society, where it has remained nearly untouched. To the author's knowledge, only one published work (Candace Wellman's *Interwoven Lives*) has used the collection, drawing on an 1858 letter that described the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush.² This note brings attention to one of Royle's 1860 letters, in which he detailed a large-scale battle between Indigenous attackers and the American army. Some circumstantial evidence points toward his account's plausibility. At the same time, the absence of direct corroboration raises the serious possibility that Royle invented the story. The objective truth remains – and may well remain – a mystery. This note argues that, at least for now, historians should not dismiss the potential of a battle between US and Indigenous forces and that no matter the veracity of Royle's account, the mere potential for such a battle suggests the need for a broader reinterpretation of the Pig War.³ Royle's letter reminds historians that part of the American army's mission on San Juan was to occupy an Indigenous homeland. Indeed, the Pig War's fundamental legacy was San Juan Island's transformation from an Indigenous homeland into a settler-occupied space, an evolution assisted by the American and British armies' lengthy presence on the island.

¹ On the Pig War, see especially James O. McCabe, *The San Juan Water Boundary Question* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964); Keith Murray, *The Pig War* (Tacoma, WA: Washington State Historical Society, 1968); Scott Kaufman, *The Pig War: The United States, Britain, and the Balance of Power in the Pacific Northwest, 1846–72* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004); Mike Vouri, *The Pig War: Standoff at Griffin Bay* (Pullman, WA: Basalt Books, 2022).

² Candace Wellman, *Interwoven Lives: Indigenous Mothers of Salish Coast Communities* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 2019), 196, 264n57.

³ For works that emphasize the Pig War's roots in settler-Indigenous conflict, see Ben Sheriff, "The Pig War: Settler-Indigenous Conflict, Empire, and the Limits of State Power in the Antebellum Pacific Northwest" (BA honours thesis, Wesleyan University, 2025); Arielle Rose Gorin, "Cascadian Crossings: The Battle for the Pacific Northwest Borderlands after the Oregon Treaty" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2016), 108–48.

Born in New York City, Private William Henry Royle joined the US Army in 1857 at the age of twenty-one.⁴ Royle seemingly enlisted at least in part to support his mother financially. Royle's mother had left the private's ne'er-do-well father and moved with her five children to Providence in 1849.⁵ Private Royle, his mother's eldest son, took responsibility for supporting his mother, who later asserted that "when William was in the army he assisted her from his pay and continued to do so as long as he could."⁶ Remitting money seems to have become especially important after the global economic crisis of 1857. On 5 February 1858, Royle wrote to his mother that he was "very sorry to hear by your letter of the hard times that now prevail all over these great United States."⁷ The private pledged to send twenty dollars home soon.⁸ His next letter, too, promised funds, although Private Royle expressed doubts about whether the money would reach her; in the end, he decided to risk it.⁹ Two months later, Royle once more gave his mother twenty dollars, but he remained concerned about the safety of sending money. "Write to me as soon as you receive this for I will want to know if you get it," he told his mother.¹⁰ These letters, too, suggest that Royle hoped his enlistment might aid his mother.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Royle's correspondence reveals a genuine fondness for his mother. The letters themselves were labours of love:

⁴ The enlistment of "William H. Royle" can be found in the *US Army Register of Enlistments 1798-1914*, folio 210, roll 25, M 233, RG 94, National Archives and Records Administration, Division 1 (hereafter NARA).

⁵ Elizabeth Royle described her husband as "a very dissatisfied man," and another affidavit from a longtime acquaintance of the Royles reported that Elizabeth left her husband "on account of the dissipation and bad habits of her said husband." Affidavit of Elizabeth Royle, 4 April 1886, Pension Record of Elizabeth Royle, certificate 236379, claim 355507, box 35622, E 12-A, RG 15, NARA; Affidavit of Daniel C. Martling, 21 February 1887, Pension Record of Elizabeth Royle, certificate 236379, claim 355507, box 35622, E 12-A, RG 15, NARA. Elizabeth Royle may have misled a census taker in 1850, who recorded that John Royle, her husband, lived with the family in Providence. *Population Schedules of the Seventh Census of the United States 1850*, family 439, dwelling 303, folio 25r, roll 844, M 432, RG 29, NARA.

⁶ Affidavit of Elizabeth Royle, 4 April 1886.

⁷ William Henry Royle to Elizabeth Royle, 5 February 1858, folder 1, box 1, MsSC 211, William Henry Royle Papers, Washington State Historical Society (hereafter WSHS). Royle's initial rendering of this line was: "my Dear Mother i am very Sory to hear by your letter of the hard times that Now prevail all over these great united states." For readers' ease, I have fixed throughout this note the frequent misspellings and mis-capitalizations that permeate the private's letters. I have opted not to note his other grammatical mistakes with "[sic]" for the same reason.

⁸ W. Royle to E. Royle, 5 February 1858.

⁹ William Henry Royle to Elizabeth Royle, 25 May 1858, folder 1, box 1, William Henry Royle Papers, WSHS.

¹⁰ William Henry Royle to Elizabeth Royle, 29 July 1858, folder 1, box 1, William Henry Royle Papers, WSHS.

Royle was semi-literate, and he described “trying to learn all I can” to ease his mother’s comprehension of his letters.¹¹ Nothing but fondness permeated Royle’s correspondence. “I am your son and I don’t think that I have done right when I left home,” his earliest surviving letter reads. “Dear mother being so far away from home and not having the pleasure of seeing you and my dear sisters I can hold from letting the tears running down my eyes when I read your letters.”¹² Later the same year, he wrote: “I think about you all night and day, I am far from you in a wild Indian land but still Dearest Mother I think of you every time I lie down and when I get up in the morning.”¹³ Royle often sent poetry to his mother, and his poem of 26 August 1860 encapsulated the relationship: “My pen is poor / My ink is pale / My love to you / Will never fail.”¹⁴

It is not the private’s love for his mother that makes his 26 August correspondence remarkable but rather his description of a battle between US and Indigenous forces on San Juan Island. Royle wrote this letter several months into his company’s second stint on San Juan since the Pig War began.¹⁵ The private’s letter started much like his previous correspondence, detailing his love for his family (“Dear Mother I feel fretful for you and my brother and sisters”) and his life as a frontier soldier. Daily life was not easy, and Royle complained to his mother, “My wages is low and my grub is fast.” What follows, though, is extraordinary. For the only time in his surviving papers, Royle reported fighting an enemy. One day, according to Royle’s account, a fellow American soldier went to wash himself. Unbeknownst to this soldier, a group of three thousand Indigenous attackers had “came and broke in our camp.” These raiders ambushed the bathing soldier, shooting him in the ribs before “rush[ing] up towards him ... to plunge a knife in him.” The terrified man yelled and “made for the quarters for his rifle.” His comrades sprung to action. As the Indigenous attackers took cover behind the camp’s outer perimeter and fired into the encampment, the Americans “all rush[ed] out with our rifles and belts and fired into them.” Royle described a rout: The Americans “drove them off the island” with “only one man wounded in the company after killing

¹¹ W. Royle to E. Royle, 25 May 1858.

¹² W. Royle to E. Royle, 5 February 1858.

¹³ William Henry Royle to Elizabeth Royle, 25 October 1858, folder 1, box 1, William Henry Royle Papers, WSHS.

¹⁴ William Henry Royle to Elizabeth Royle, 26 August 1860, folder 1, box 1, William Henry Royle Papers, WSHS.

¹⁵ On 18 June 1860, Royle wrote, “Dear Mother we are now on Camp Pickett San Juan Island again but there is not so much excitement about it as there was before when we was here.” William Henry Royle to Elizabeth Royle, 18 June 1860, folder 1, box 1, William Henry Royle Papers, WSHS.

Camp Pettitt San Juan. Washington Territory.
August 26 1860

Dearest Mother,

I now take this pleasure to write a few lines to you and don't know but I am well and in good health. And I hope this Letter may find you all the same blessing. Dear Mother I received your first Letter in August 24 and received your other kind Letter on the 26-1860 Oh how happy I was to hear from you & gain but very sorry to hear of my Uncle Jacob's death. Dear Mother I staid to write a Letter last week to you but had not time to finish it. I have been very busy for this last week painting the Captains house on duty and this Sunday evening I set down to write when I thought I would have time to write & gain to you. Dear Mother I hope you will not feel an easy easy & don't me for I hope I may see you all & gain be for I see many more hard times. I have no need to stand & gain in the 26-1860. I hope I will reach you & gain in 1862 so for six months. I may ship in Calponer to go round the horn on some vessel for the states if nothing happens me in my way. Dear Mother I feel fullfill for you and my brother and sisters. my wages is low and my grub is fast so all the time stop here. I have been with the company fighting with some Indians and drove them off the Island and only one man armed in the company after killing 30 or 40 Indians so the squaws said that was left behind to take the bodies and bury them there was about 5000 come to and look in our camp when one of the men was going to wash they fired & shot at him and glanced of his robes and then the Indians rush up to wards him to plunge a knife in him when he gave one yell and made for the coast for his rifle. and at the same time the Indians shoutd and ran for the bush and staid behind the logs fired in towards the camp when we all rush out with our rifles and belts and fired in to them disfull which we cant not help we had Orders to do so

Figure 1. Letter written by William H. Royle to his mother, Elizabeth Royle, 26 August 1860. Source: Image courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

30 or 40 Indians so the squaws said that was left behind to take the bodies and bury them.” Luckily for Royle and his company, the attack happened before the Americans went to bed. “If we had been ... sleeping in the night they would [have] killed all hand of us – they will not trouble us again.” So concluded Royle’s dramatic account. His very next line – “Oh Dear Mother the news is very dull” – shifted the topic back to quotidian matters, chiefly the high price of flour and bread.¹⁶

¹⁶ W. Royle to E. Royle, 26 August 1860.

if we had ben to sleeping in the night they would killed all hand of us -
 they will not trouble us again. Oh Dear Mother the news is very dull
 so I am glad that flower and other things is coming down. It may be dear
 in the states but it is called cheap out here butter is 45 cents per pound and
 on sirup loaf of bread is 25 cents and small loaves. mackerel is 10 cents a box
 where you get 2 and 3 boxes for one cent it is like taking money out of a mans
 pocket here wages is from 12 and 2 and 3 Dollars a day for a hard working man
 Oh how I wish I was back there again. there was 2 men in a canoe going
 east the scamps when 3 canoes came up to them coast with Indes and took
 all they had and took axes and cutt them up to pieces and the canoe
 that they was in it dropped in the town with their flesh stuck fast
 in the canoe but could not catch the indies they had got out when they
 saw the dead the steamer was sent for to find them but had not returned
 in port yet she has ben four days gone with 8 guns load of her
 well load with shell and grap shot. I hope these few lines will
 not make you feel bad for me. I am well ported if any things turn
 out there is no danger for me nor any of the company we are now 45 men
 strong a gain of few out of others Companies C and E and F and H.
 be sides our own D. Company there is very fine weather here at present.
 Dear Mother I feel very glad to hear that all my sisters and Brothers is
 well and all my friends I hope to hear from them soon please to give
 my love and best regards to all my quiron friends. I would like to
 write to you all but I hope you will excuse me for I am very busy
 now and I cant get newspapers here and I have no money to post
 them so I have to buy it untill pay day from the shargent of the company
 which I can get trust from any one but the money is very small here
 so Dearest Mother I will bring my Letters to a close
 I still remain my loving to you all. Oh Mother this is
 from your eld son.

Figure 2. Page two of letter written by William H. Royle to Elizabeth Royle, 26 August 1860. Source: Image courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

Royle's account raises myriad questions: Who carried out this alleged attack and why? Is there corroborating evidence to support Royle's narrative? If not, did the alleged battle's contemporaries have reasons to cover up this incident? Did Royle have a motive for inventing this story? All these questions point toward a broader issue: Should historians believe Royle? None of these questions have definitive answers, leaving the historian with the final, all-important question: What do we make

of Royle's account given contradictory evidence? This note will address these questions in turn.

Indigenous Peoples from north of the forty-ninth parallel, whom settlers often generically called "Northern Indians," stand as the alleged attack's most likely perpetrators. Royle did not identify the Indigenous Peoples whom he claimed carried out the attack, but the timing of the supposed ambush provides some clues. Royle sent his previous letter, with no mention of any battle, on 18 June 1860, so the skirmish seemingly happened between mid-June and late August 1860.¹⁷ Clarifying the event's timeline points toward the "Northern Indians," an amorphous term that settlers applied to a number of non-Coast Salish Peoples located in British Columbia and Russian Alaska, especially the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian.¹⁸ Settlers in Washington Territory feared these northern Peoples' raiding prowess, and the mid- and late 1850s saw episodic violence between settlers and some of these Peoples.¹⁹ British Columbia's governor James Douglas wrote multiple dispatches in the summer of

¹⁷ It is impossible to date the private's account precisely, especially given that Royle could have started and completed the letter on different days. The letter's content suggests that Royle started writing no earlier than 26 August, as his second line mentioned receiving a letter from his mother on 26 August. While Royle could have composed his account of an Indigenous attack on a different date, no internal evidence from his correspondence indicates that this is the case. Nothing – either visual or rhetorical – suggests a break in writing between when he started the letter and when he described the battle, even though later in the letter, Royle indicated that he was closing his letter, only to resume with another section on a separate piece of paper. It thus seems possible, even likely, that Royle wrote the final section of his letter, which discussed his decision not to reenlist in the army and his plan for coming home, after 26 August. Even though Royle seemingly wrote his letter in more than one sitting, it nonetheless appears that he penned the portion about the Indigenous attack on 26 August 1860. Moreover, even if the attack occurred after Royle started his letter, no corroborating evidence for his account exists for the months following August 1860. No matter the exact date that Royle wrote his account of an Indigenous attack, then, the basic conclusion about his claim remains unaltered: Historians should not disregard Royle's account given that the private lacked any motivation to tell his mother an invented story, but the lack of corroboration also means that historians should view the private's assertion with due skepticism.

¹⁸ Although settlers also applied the term "Northern Indians" to the Kwakwaka'wakw, especially in an earlier era, by the time of Royle's letter, the term was more likely to refer to the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian. This change in nomenclature occurred as Kwakwaka'wakw raids in the region declined during the early 1850s, the same moment when Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian migrations into the Salish Sea's borderlands began in earnest. John Lutz, "Work, Sex, and Death on the Great Thoroughfare: Annual Migrations of 'Canadian Indians' to the American Pacific Northwest," in *Parallel Destinies: Canadian-American Relations West of the Rockies*, ed. John M. Findlay and Ken S. Coates (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 84.

¹⁹ Barry M. Gough, *Gunboat Frontier: British Maritime Authority and Northwest Coast Indians, 1846–1890* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1984), 95–107; John Lutz, "Inventing an Indian War: Canadian Indians and American Settlers in the Pacific West, 1854–1864," *Journal of the West* 38, no. 3 (1998): esp. 7–10; Lissa K. Wadewitz, "Rethinking the 'Indian War': Northern Indians and Intra-Native Politics in the Western Canada-U.S. Borderlands," *Western Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2019): 339–61 passim.

1860 that referenced a large influx of so-called Northern Indians into the region around Victoria.²⁰ On 3 August, Douglas communicated to Rear Admiral Robert Lambert Baynes that the situation was “becoming every day more complicated, in consequence of continued fresh arrivals, which have now swelled their numbers to upwards of four thousand.” Douglas told the admiral, “This large assemblage is unprecedented within my experience.” These “Northern Indians” were well-armed; Douglas reported that efforts to confiscate their firearms remained relatively unsuccessful – “only fifty muskets and two pistols have been taken ... during the past month” – and noted that “taking possession of all their arms” was “not practicable.”²¹ American army correspondence suggested that the “Northern Indians” visited the San Juans in the early summer months of 1860.²² Their presence proved worrying enough for the American military to station the USS *Massachusetts* near the island.²³ In late August, a directive reaffirmed that the warship should remain in its new position “in connection with Northern Indians, in the vicinity of San Juan Island.”²⁴ Settlers, too, had become uneasy. Residents of Nanaimo and Salt Spring Island petitioned Douglas for protection from the “Northern Indians.”²⁵ Americans shared the concern, leading one man to write in early August that the widespread presence of “Northern Indians” in Puget Sound had made it so that “boatmen, or any one [*sic*] having occasion to travel only a few miles on the Sound, are in luck if they do not lose their scalp.”²⁶ It is known, then, that large groups of non-Coast Salish Peoples from north of the forty-ninth parallel entered the region around San Juan Island in the months surrounding Royle’s letter, that they had firearms, and that settlers perceived them to be a threat.

²⁰ James Douglas to the Duke of Newcastle, 7 July 1860, folios 328r–343r, C.O. 305/14, University of Victoria Colonial Dispatches Project Digital Archive (hereafter UVIC), <https://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/V60034.html>; James Douglas to the Duke of Newcastle, 8 August 1860, folios 365r–368r, C.O. 305/14, UVIC, <https://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/V60039.html>.

²¹ James Douglas to Robert Lambert Baynes, 3 August 1860, folios 375r–378v, C.O. 305/14, UVIC, <https://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/V60039.html>.

²² George E. Pickett to M.T. Simmons, 19 June 1860, vol. 1, E 409–1, RG 393, NARA; George E. Pickett to the Adjutant General, Department of Oregon, 18 July 1860, vol. 1, E 409–1, RG 393, NARA.

²³ James A. Hardin to George E. Pickett, 28 July 1860, vol. 1, E 409–3, RG 393, NARA.

²⁴ James A. Hardin to Silas Casey, 20 August 1860, vol. 1, E 409–1, RG 393, NARA.

²⁵ Petition of Settlers on Salt Spring Island, undated, folios 370r–371r, C.O. 305/14, UVIC, https://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/V60039.html#co_305_14_00372r.jpg; Petition of Inhabitants of Nanaimo, undated, folios 372r–373v, C.O. 305/14, UVIC, https://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/V60039.html#co_305_14_00372r.jpg.

²⁶ “Shall We Defend Ourselves?” *The North-West* (Port Townsend), 9 August 1860.

Among the Indigenous Peoples called “Northern Indians,” the Haida appear the most probable attackers. Among settlers, the Haida’s raiding acumen earned them a fearsome reputation as the “Vikings of the North Pacific.”²⁷ The group thus makes sense as the American troops’ adversary, especially because settlers had recently given the Haida a reason to attack San Juan.²⁸ On 21 May, the HBC farm’s daily journal recorded that “a Hyder [*sic*] was shot down town [*sic*] last night by an American whiskey dealer.”²⁹ Washington Territory’s governor Henry McGill soon alerted the American army that “one of the Hyder [*sic*] Indians was killed at San Juan by some white men.” Early reports blamed “the instigation of the whites” for the incident, which had potentially severe consequences. McGill feared “that the Savages, as is invariably the case, will seize the first opportunity to be revenged upon our citizens.”³⁰ The army reported that the whiskey dealer had murdered a Haida “chief” and that the army had responded by placing nighttime guards in civilian areas of San Juan to protect against reprisals.³¹ A July letter from Captain George Pickett downplayed the danger to American forces on the island but noted, “It is most likely that before the numerous hordes return to their Northern homes that some depredations will be committed here in retaliation for the murder of one of their Chiefs, which took place some two months since.”³² This incident provides a plausible motive for why a raid such as the one Royle described might have occurred, lending credibility to the private’s account.

Yet other evidence points against a battle, and no known source directly corroborates Royle’s account. Local newspapers, never shy to publicize Indigenous attacks, reported nothing. Governor Douglas’s dispatches mentioned no confrontation on San Juan. His same correspondence that discussed large groups of so-called Northern Indians gathering near Victoria stressed that these groups, on the whole, remained “perfectly quiet and tractable,” and in a 25 August dispatch, Douglas conveyed that “all continues quiet amongst the Indians around Victoria.”³³ Admiral

²⁷ Gough, *Gunboat Frontier*, 96.

²⁸ John Lutz shows that raids by “Northern Indians” nearly always occurred in retaliation for settler attacks. Lutz, “Inventing an Indian War,” 10.

²⁹ Entry dated 21 May 1860, folio 77v, roll B.15/a/2, Bell Vue Sheep Farm Post Journal, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives (hereafter HBCA).

³⁰ Henry McGill to Silas Casey, 30 May 1860, folios 42r–43r of Henry McGill’s copybook, MS-0011, Henry McGill Correspondence, Washington State Library (hereafter WSL).

³¹ Unsigned letter addressed to “Captain,” 1 June 1860, vol. 1, E 409–1, RG 393, NARA.

³² Pickett to the Adjutant General, Department of Oregon, 18 July 1860.

³³ Douglas to the Duke of Newcastle, 7 July 1860; James Douglas to the Duke of Newcastle, 25 August 1860, folios 382r–383r, C.O. 305/14, UVIC, <https://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/V60041.html>.

Baynes concurred, telling London, “I do not think that there is the slightest ground for alarm.”³⁴ The HBC sheep farm on San Juan maintained a daily journal, which, too, recorded nothing about an attack.³⁵ It seems unthinkable that the HBC employees would have missed a battle of the scale Royle described, especially because the incident supposedly happened at the American camp, located adjacent to the HBC farm.³⁶ American sources also do not reference a battle. The Office of Indian Affairs reported no such skirmish, and Captain Pickett wrote several summer letters about the “Northern Indians” – including one written after 26 August – but none described an armed confrontation.³⁷ Both British and American sources, then, fail to support Royle’s account, casting serious doubt upon it.

Of course, one must consider whether these British and American sources might have purposely concealed an engagement. Governor Douglas may have had some reason to obscure a battle. Although London officials generally lacked confidence in Douglas, they did appreciate his ability to control Indigenous populations.³⁸ One can imagine that a settler-Indigenous battle in the region might have eroded Douglas’s job security, and perhaps this fact could have encouraged the governor

³⁴ Robert Lambert Baynes to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 9 August 1860, GR-4216, BC Archives. In many ways, British officials’ reports of peaceful relations are unsurprising. As scholars have documented, many Indigenous people from north of the forty-ninth parallel migrated throughout the region to trade and take jobs as hired labourers rather than to raid settlers. See Lutz, “Inventing an Indian War,” 12; Lutz, “Work, Sex, and Death,” 85; John Lutz, *Makúk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 167–71; Wadewitz, “Rethinking the ‘Indian War,’” 342; Lissa K. Wadewitz, “Abundance and Resilience in the Salish Sea,” in *Salish Archipelago: Environment and Society in the Islands Within and Adjacent to the Salish Sea*, ed. Moshe Rapaport (Canberra, AU: ANU Press, 2024), 199–200, 210.

³⁵ See the entries for June, July, and August 1860, folios 78v–85v, roll B.15/a/2, Belle Vue Sheep Farm Post Journal, HBCA.

³⁶ On 9 September 1859, Douglas wrote, “In the meantime the [American] occupation of San Juan is every day becoming more complete; the troops have been removed to, and now occupy, a commanding hill ... contiguous to the settlement of the Hudsons [sic] Bay Company.” James Douglas to the Duke of Newcastle, 9 September 1859, folios 148r–150r, C.O. 305/11, UVIC, <https://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/V59045.html>.

³⁷ M.T. Simmons to Edward Geary, 1 July 1860, in *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Accompanying the Annual Report of the Secretary of the Interior, for the Year 1860* (Washington, DC: George W. Bowman, 1860), 186–98; Report of Washington Superintendency, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Accompanying the Annual Report of the Secretary of the Interior, for the Year 1861* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1861), 172–90; Pickett to the Adjutant General, Department of Oregon, 18 July 1860; George E. Pickett to James A. Hardin, 28 August 1860, vol. 1, E 409–1, RG 393, NARA. The author thanks one of *BC Studies*’ anonymous reviewers for drawing his attention to the Office of Indian Affairs reports.

³⁸ Adele Perry, *Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 190.

to hide the incident. Douglas indeed had some history of downplaying settler-Indigenous hostilities. Two years prior, for instance, Douglas failed to tell London when an American militia killed more than thirty Nlaka'pamux during the Fraser Canyon War.³⁹ Unlike Douglas, though, the Royal Navy had no clear motive for eliding a battle on San Juan. One can dismiss the idea that the navy wanted to protect Governor Douglas. The governor had sparred with Rear Admiral Baynes over how to respond to the American occupation of San Juan and then quarrelled over whether to keep a royal marine garrison in Victoria.⁴⁰ American army officers, too, possessed minimal reason to cover up a battle, and the press – both American and British – had positive incentives to publish a sensational story. The odds that all parties' reports went astray remain infinitesimal. The probability of a coordinated effort to hide the battle seems equally minuscule, making it difficult to accept Royle's account.

Yet no plausible explanation exists for why Royle would invent the story. Royle penned his letter to his mother, with whom he enjoyed a devoted relationship and whom he had no incentive to mislead. Perhaps the private's boredom encouraged his imagination to run wild, but Royle's account – whether true or fictional – would have worried his mother, whom the private seemed concerned not to frighten. Earlier in his 26 August letter, he wrote, "Dear Mother I hope you will not feel uneasy about me for I hope I may see you all again before I see any more hard times." Later in the letter, he told his mother not to worry because he would not reenlist and would instead soon head home. Even if boredom gripped the far-flung private, it seems unlikely that he would have fabricated a harrowing experience to his distant and loving mother, of all people. The privately communicated story, furthermore, held no commercial value to the private, and the narrative did not paint Royle in a particularly heroic light. The private considered his role in the alleged battle compulsory; his company "could not help" its actions, which it took because "we had orders to do so."⁴¹ Royle's previous correspondence showed no tendency to exaggerate threats; he dismissed in 1858 the possibility of the government deploying his company to fight the Mormons, and his June 1860 letter from San Juan described a lack of "excitement."⁴² Royle seems to have been neither prone to imagination

³⁹ Daniel P. Marshall, "No Parallel: American Miner-Soldiers at War with the Nlaka'pamux of the Canadian West," in *Parallel Destinies*, ed. Findlay and Coates, 62–63.

⁴⁰ In May 1860, the Colonial Office complained, "Governor Douglas is rather too fond of entering into debate with the Admiral." Minute of Thomas Elliot, 29 May [1860], folios 32v–33r, C.O. 305/15, UVIC, <https://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/V605AD06.html>.

⁴¹ W. Royle to E. Royle, 26 August 1860.

⁴² W. Royle to E. Royle, 5 February 1858; W. Royle to E. Royle, 18 June 1860.

nor likely to share a fictitious story with his mother. Why the private would concoct the story lacks explanation, suggesting that historians should not disregard his letter.

Thus, two unconvincing possibilities – that other sources stayed silent (accidentally or purposely) about the battle or that Royle made up the event – make interpreting his 26 August letter difficult. No clear answers emerge, and it is the author's hope – and the goal of this note – that a future researcher will find what today remains elusive evidence that determines whether a battle occurred on San Juan in the summer of 1860.

For now, the only almost-certain conclusion is that no event of the scale described by Royle took place. Three thousand attackers would have been unprecedented and would not have gone unnoticed. While it might be easy to dismiss Royle as exaggerating the numbers for effect, the fog of war would have complicated gaining an accurate count. One can imagine a fearful Royle overestimating the threat, especially because the private does not appear to have seen much combat during his service. Nevertheless, Royle seems to have drastically embellished the battle's size – that is, if any battle happened at all.

The mere possibility of a "Battle of San Juan Island," however, helps shift the Pig War's interpretation. Royle's letter reminds historians that the American army's role on San Juan Island was as much to combat Indigenous threats as to defend settlers from British officials. In May 1859, before the pig's untimely demise, San Juan's American settlers appealed for military protection from Indigenous threats, especially the danger posed by northern Indigenous raiders.⁴³ Two months later (and a few weeks after the attempted arrest, or so Americans claimed, of the pig's killer), American settlers petitioned for a military garrison on San Juan, yet their July appeal mentioned nothing about the pig-related incident; instead, it cited several recent attacks on American settlers (which San Juan's residents blamed on "neighboring Indians") as well as the fact that "we are continually in fear of descent upon us by . . . marauding northern Indians" to justify a military occupation.⁴⁴ When General William S. Harney ordered troops onto San Juan, his instructions to Captain Pickett listed two rationales. One was "to resist all attempts at interference by the British authorities . . . by intimidation or force," and the other was "to protect the inhabitants of the island from the incursions of the

⁴³ Henry Crosbie to Lewis Cass, 3 April 1860, H.R. Ex. Doc. No. 77, at 4 (1860).

⁴⁴ Petition dated 11 July 1859, page 6 of Washington State National Guard, *Collection of Official Documents on the San Juan Imbroglio*, folder "San Juan Controversy," box 1C-1-1, AR1-4-0-1, Governor Richard Gholson Papers, Washington State Archives (hereafter WSA).

northern Indians of British Columbia and the Russian possessions.”⁴⁵ Once the Anglo-American conflict cooled and a joint occupation occurred, the army stayed, at least in part, to combat Indigenous threats. By 1861, the spectre of Indigenous threats became the chief reason why the American army remained on San Juan. The American garrison originally received orders to vacate the island after the Civil War began, but the War Department reversed this decision “in consequence of the threatening attitude of the Indians.”⁴⁶ Washington Territory’s governor Henry McGill wrote Edwin Sumner, who commanded the Department of the Pacific, to emphasize that Puget Sound’s “only protection” from the “Northern Indians” had been “the presence of the United States troops on San Juan Island.” Removing these troops would create widespread fear, and Governor McGill thus “most earnestly” requested that San Juan’s American garrison remain.⁴⁷ It is the army’s anti-Indigenous purpose – throughout all phases of the Pig War – that Royle’s letter emphasizes, no matter its veracity. His account reminds us that the army on San Juan aimed to prevent Indigenous threats to the island’s American settlers. The army was there in case an Indigenous attack (such as the one he described) occurred, and the army would repel any Indigenous incursion with force (such as his account suggested happened).

The safety provided by federal troops helped enable San Juan Island’s settlement. This result was no accident: One of the island’s settlers explained that the threat posed by northern Indigenous raiders had “prevented the settlement of San Juan and the adjoining isolated islands for years, this being the stopping place or point of departure from whence the northern marauding Indians issued to commit their depredations.”⁴⁸ When San Juan’s settlers petitioned General Harney in July 1859, they emphasized that settler fears of “northern Indians” (“who infest these waters in large numbers”) were “greatly retarding the progress of the settlement of this island.”⁴⁹ Federal protection allowed the island’s settler population to balloon. When Harney occupied San

⁴⁵ Alfred Pleasonton to George E. Pickett, 18 July 1859, page 4 of Washington State National Guard, *Collection of Official Documents on the San Juan Imbrolio*, folder “San Juan Controversy,” box 1C-1-1, Governor Richard Gholson Papers, WSA.

⁴⁶ J. Neilson Barry, “San Juan Island in the Civil War,” *Washington Historical Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1929): 134; Copy of Special Orders No. 9, 11 June 1861, folios 229r–230r, C.O. 305/17, UVIC, https://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/V61040.html#co_305_17_00230r.jpg; Copy of Special Orders No. 13, 21 June 1861, folio 63r, C.O. 305/18, UVIC, https://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/V615AD08.html#co_305_18_00064r.jpg.

⁴⁷ Henry McGill to Edwin V. Sumner, 24 June 1861, folder “Correspondence Outgoing, 1861,” Henry McGill Correspondence, WSL.

⁴⁸ Crosbie to Cass, 3 April 1860.

⁴⁹ Petition dated 11 July 1859.

Juan, only twenty-five or so settlers lived on the island.⁵⁰ Within a year, that number had more than doubled to over sixty civilians.⁵¹ The 1870 census recorded a further expansion to over two hundred settlers living on San Juan Island.⁵² When the US Army left San Juan in 1874, then, the island had transformed – in no small part due to the army's presence – into a settler-occupied space. This change marked a drastic shift; for millennia, Coast Salish Peoples had inhabited the island freely.⁵³ The island's Pig War transformation had serious consequences for Indigenous people, restricting their access to traditional fishing, gathering, and hunting areas. These effects have never disappeared. As archaeologist Julie Stein explains, "These resources have been depleted or destroyed through development, farming, and livestock grazing, and access to them is often blocked by private ownership."⁵⁴ In this sense, the American occupation of San Juan Island, facilitated by the American army's mid-nineteenth-century presence, remains ongoing. Royle's account underscores that the threat of violence against Indigenous Peoples enabled this settler occupation.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ William S. Harney to the Assistant Adjutant General [Lorenzo Thomas], 19 July 1859, *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Canadian Relations, 1784–1860*, vol. 4, ed. William R. Manning (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1943), 186–88.

⁵¹ *Population Schedules of the Eighth Census of the United States 1860*, folios 16–17, roll 1398, M 653, RG 29, NARA.

⁵² *Population Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States 1870*, folios 342v–346v, roll 1683, M 593, RG 29, NARA.

⁵³ Royle's letter, in addition to shifting our traditional understanding of the Pig War, reveals the geopolitically precarious situation of Coast Salish communities during this period. While this note focuses on how the Pig War demonstrates the role of the British and, particularly, the American militaries in facilitating a settler occupation of the region, it is also noteworthy that the Indigenous attackers whom Royle identified as the US Army's foe were most likely the so-called Northern Indians. These northern Peoples were not local to the borderlands around the San Juan Islands; instead, they resided hundreds of miles farther north. They attacked not only settlers but also local Coast Salish Peoples, a phenomenon that had become increasingly common in the period preceding the Pig War. Royle's letter, then, also reveals the extent to which the Coast Salish faced a triumvirate of potential threats – the British and, especially, the Americans and "Northern Indians" – in the 1850s. On the increase of "Northern Indian" raids in the 1850s, see Wadewitz, "Rethinking the 'Indian War,'" 341–43; Lutz, "Work, Sex, and Death," 82–84. The author is very grateful to one of *BC Studies'* anonymous reviewers for pointing out the implications of Royle's letter for understanding intra-Indigenous geopolitics in the mid-nineteenth-century Salish Sea borderlands.

⁵⁴ Julie K. Stein, *Exploring Coast Salish Prehistory: The Archaeology of San Juan Island* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 6.

⁵⁵ In this new reading of the Pig War, one irony becomes that although settlers depended upon military assistance to occupy a Coast Salish homeland, the military primarily aimed to defend settlers not from Coast Salish Peoples but from Nations headquartered hundreds of miles to the north. Nevertheless, the result remained the same: the Euro-American settlement of Coast Salish lands, an outcome enabled by the military garrison on San Juan Island.

This research note thus has two interconnected aims. The first is to bring Royle's letter to scholars' attention, with the hope that a future historian will find evidence – whether archival, oral, or archaeological – to corroborate or contradict the private's account more certainly. For now, the balance of evidence leaves an ambiguous picture, and this note argues that scholars should neither entirely accept nor entirely dismiss the existence of a "Battle of San Juan Island." The second is to argue that even without a clear view of the veracity of Royle's account, the private's letter still provides evidence that historians should discard a traditional interpretation of the Pig War as a triumph of peace and take more seriously the Pig War's effects on Indigenous populations.⁵⁶ At a minimum, Royle's letter reminds us of what was possible: the American army forcibly repelling an Indigenous attack. Far from peaceful, the army's occupation of San Juan Island aimed at facilitating the settler occupation of an Indigenous homeland. Given the paucity of scholarship on the Pig War's effects on Indigenous populations, calls for more such scholarship have recently emerged.⁵⁷ This note echoes these calls, especially because historians should now reconsider the assumption that the "war" ended without human casualties. As scholars investigate the Pig War's effect on Indigenous individuals and communities, they will undoubtedly uncover new evidence. Hopefully, some of this evidence will help make further sense of the alleged "Battle of San Juan Island."

⁵⁶ On the dispute's historiography and memory, see Gordon Robert Lyall, "From Imbroglia to Pig War: The San Juan Island Dispute, 1853–1871, in History and Memory," *BC Studies* 186 (Summer 2015): 73–93.

⁵⁷ Melissa Baker and Cyrus Forman, "True Casualties of the Pig War: Reassessing the San Juan Boundary Dispute 150 Years Later," *Columbia: The Magazine of Northwestern History* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 6–13; Douglas C. Wilson, *The Historical Archaeology of the Pacific Northwest* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2024), 103.