



R. Gregory Nokes *Massacred For Gold*

Anatomy of a (120-year-old) mass murder.

BY MATT BUCKINGHAM | MBUCKINGHAM AT WWEEK DOT COM [October 14th, 2009]

So many history books are written essentially the same way. First, the author immerses himself in research. Then, based on a preponderance of the evidence, he crafts a seamless, chronological narrative of how it all “must have” happened. If the author’s prose isn’t completely impenetrable, critics will gush how it “reads like a novel,” as if that were necessarily a good thing.

R. Gregory Nokes rises above this formula with *Massacred for Gold* (OSU Press, 208 pages, \$18.95), his investigation of the mass murder of more than 30 Chinese gold miners in Hells Canyon in 1887. I say “more than 30” because historians don’t know exactly how many Chinese were killed, although most agree it was 31 or 34 (only 11 were ever identified by name, Nokes laments).

Nokes’ book is a chronicle within a chronicle, explaining not only how and why the murders occurred but how the author had to sift through scant and often contradictory evidence to make sense of a crime that happened more than 120 years ago. The result is a challenging but refreshingly honest portrait of how history is not only made but written—a messy, non-chronological affair full of gaps and contradictions that are usually papered over in most of the informed speculation that passes for history today.

A retired reporter and editor who wrote extensively about the murders for *The Oregonian* beginning in 1995, Nokes begins his book viewing his subject as through a glass darkly. He first recounts the tale as told by a Snake River jetboat captain to a group of tourists: A gang of horse thieves lined up 34 Chinese gold miners in Hells Canyon and shot them one by one because they wouldn’t reveal where they’d hidden their gold.

