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Remembering Hugh Nibley as a Scholar and, More Importantly, as a Man: Observing the Faith of the Observer

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REMEMBERING HUGH NIBLEY AS A SCHOLAR AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, AS A MAN: *OBSERVING THE FAITH OF THE OBSERVER*

David Rolph Seely

Review of *Hugh Nibley Observed*, edited by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Shirley Ricks, and Stephen Whitlock (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2021). 820 pages. \$45.00 (hardback), \$35.00 (paperback).

Abstract: *Those who knew Brother Nibley best knew he was a remarkable man of both depth and breadth. This new volume plumbs both that depth and breadth in the recounting of personal stories and colorful history. This volume is a welcome addition to any library.*

I knew Hugh Nibley from 1976, when I took my first class with him, until his death in 2005. As my teacher and as a scholar, he had a great impact on my intellectual and spiritual life as a student at BYU. Through the years, the example of Hugh Nibley as a man has continued to inform my life. For this reason, this book is important to me.

As a tribute to Hugh Nibley, the editors of this volume have collected forty essays written by Nibley's family, his peers and colleagues, and his students and friends. The title of the book is a play on the title of Nibley's autobiographical film entitled *The Faith of an Observer: Conversations with Hugh Nibley*. The stated purpose of this volume is to explore and celebrate the extraordinary life and career through "a kaleidoscope of portraits, perspectives, and memories from family, friends, and colleagues — observers, as it were, of a preeminent observer" (xv). This volume is a valuable and welcome complement to two biographies previously written: *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*, by Boyd Peterson and *Sergeant Nibley, PhD: Memories of an Unlikely Screaming Eagle*, by Alex Nibley. A few of these pieces have been published elsewhere, but the great majority are new. There are more than two hundred photos

throughout the volume, many from the Nibley family, that help to illuminate the life and work of Hugh Nibley.

Having perused the whole of the book and read many of the essays, let me give an initial personal impression. Many years ago, while I was a BYU student, a couple of my friends and I, like many others, would try to attend every Nibley class offered on campus. We were smart enough not to take these classes for credit until we had sat through them several times because Nibley's tests and grading could be brutal. I remember an exam of about 150 points, and the highest score in the class was somewhere around 30 points. Nibley's religion classes weren't made to build your self-esteem. But we simply could not get enough of Hugh Nibley.

One day we heard that Brother Nibley taught Gospel Doctrine in his home ward, so we determined that we would start attending his Sunday classes as well. I clearly remember attending the first Sunday School class. One of the things that we had noticed in his classes was that he often would teach about whatever topic he happened to be publishing on at the time — especially the Book of Mormon, the Book of Moses, or the Book of Abraham. It didn't matter what the Sunday School class was supposed to be about; he would simply begin by presenting and discussing his current topic of interest. One of the odd things about his BYU classes was that the final class at the end of the week never quite dovetailed with what he would start talking about on Monday morning. When we started attending his Sunday classes, we made a startling discovery that explained the situation. In his Sunday School class, he would just continue the discussion he had been conducting at the end of the school week on Friday. Then, sure enough, on Monday in his BYU class he would pick up where he left off in his Sunday lesson. So, from that time on we realized that to get the full value of the Nibley experience, we would need to attend his Sunday lectures as well.

As I read through the essays in *Hugh Nibley Observed* I had a similar feeling. I am familiar with a lot of aspects of Nibley's life and work, but many of the pieces in this volume fill in the gaps outside the *public* Nibley that could be followed on Monday through Friday. But of course, he also had a life during the weekend. And often, to understand what Brother Nibley was talking about, it is important to know what happened on the weekend! In this volume we discover the things that can help us connect the disparate things we know about Hugh Nibley into a more complete whole. For example, after I wrote this paragraph as the introduction to this review, imagine my surprise to find an account of this same phenomenon by Richard Holzapfel, one of my friends who

also attended Nibley's classes six days a week (669)! So this volume is a gift not only for those who never experienced Nibley personally but also for people like me, having known him well, who will delight in having some never-before-explained aspects of the mystery and mystique about him revealed to view.

The introductory essays by Jeffrey Bradshaw (1–14) and Stephen Whitlock (15–22), two of the editors of the volume, describe the impact Hugh Nibley and his scholarship has had on their lives. Their sentiments and experiences resonate with many of the other personal tributes in the volume. The collection is organized in four parts.

Part One: Portraits presents a broad biographical overview of Nibley and includes an essay by John W. Welch and an essay by artist Rebecca Fehser Everett about her painted portrait of Nibley. John Welch's essay, "Doorkeeper in the House of the Lord" — a verse from Psalm 84:10 and the epitaph on Nibley's gravestone — presents Nibley as a scholar who never aspired to publicity but sought to be a faithful servant. It is the tribute prepared for Nibley's 75th birthday celebration and reprinted from a festschrift prepared in his honor. It presents a nice overview and summary of Nibley's life and scholarship.

Also included in the *Portraits* section of the book is Nibley's own intellectual autobiography, which was originally published in the volume of Nibley essays *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless* (1978). For the first time, this essay is accompanied with photos that illustrate aspects of Nibley's life that are vividly described in the text. His unique, intelligent, witty, and very personal writing voice is marvelously featured in this gem of an essay.

For us as Nibley's students, this essay — along with his extended videotaped interview *Faith of An Observer* — provided the first real personal glimpse we ever got of Nibley the man. We were delighted to know there was a real human being behind the fast-talking, elusive professor we faced in our classes.

Often Brother Nibley was so preoccupied with his research that he could seem dismissive of students. The first time I went to his office to meet him, he purposely ignored me and sent me to the secretary to get a mimeographed copy of his essay "Zeal Without Knowledge," and she promptly sent me on my way. I respected his desire for privacy and respite from interruptions to his overwhelming workload, but I always wondered what he was really like. My roommate saw Nibley in the library one day in the stacks; a young woman, one of Nibley's students, shyly and apprehensively approached him and meekly said, "Hi, Professor Nibley. I am in your class and I am working on a paper on the *Pistis Sophia*. I am

wondering if you could give me some advice on my research and my paper.” “Oh, yes,” Nibley said, “I do have some advice. Do a good job.” And with that he was gone. With Nibley’s autobiographical essay and interview, we at last got some insight into the background of Nibley’s origins, his personal and academic life, and some hint of the great events of his life, including his mission and his experiences in the war. Throughout his classes he would tell of incidents and anecdotes from his life, and at last we had a framework to fit it all in. Remember, there was no Internet — we depended on the printed and videotaped words!

Part Two: Nibley, the Scholar provides revised and enlarged versions of thirteen presentations given as part of a Maxwell Institute Lecture Series organized for the centennial of Nibley’s birth. These previously unpublished essays give an assessment of Nibley’s scholarly work as it relates to various aspects of Latter-day Saint and secular scholarship. These include biographical topics such as Nibley’s early education, Nibley in graduate school, and evaluations of Nibley’s scholarship in terms of Joseph Smith, the Church, the environment, the Bible, classical scholarship, the Book of Mormon, as a mentor to the Saints, and Egyptology. Each essay broadly assesses Nibley’s scholarly work and his contributions in these various areas.

The essay by Nibley’s daughter Zina, “Nibley’s Early Education” (57–76) and the essay by his son Alex, “Graduate School through BYU” (77–98) are two of the best. In general, the contributions from Nibley’s family — those who knew him the best — are often the most honest and informative. They are full of stories and anecdotes, some of which are not found in earlier published biographies. Zina describes, for example, young Hugh being delivered to his kindergarten on a horse-drawn milk cart and running home from the principal on the first day. She tells of how, after his IQ test, one of his teachers said to him if he were to go to sleep in school and not wake up for nine years he would still be ahead of his class (60–61). She also describes in some detail the challenges in the family dynamics dealing with the prodigious and favored Hugh. She recounts Nibley’s mission preparation and experiences in Germany just before World War II. Zina concludes her essay assessing Hugh’s brilliant mind and intellectual accomplishments in his early education as follows: “Ultimately, though, his mind was uniquely keen, sharp, jam-packed, elegantly equipped, and indisputably well-trained. It was Hugh Nibley’s heart that made the difference. And it was a very good heart” (74).

In his essay “Graduate School Through BYU” (77–98), Alex recounts much of the story of Hugh Nibley’s involvement in World War II, which

Alex covered in fascinating detail within his book *Sergeant Nibley, PhD: Memories of an Unlikely Screaming Eagle*. In addition to his interviews featured in part within *Faith of an Observer*, Alex spent countless hours conversing with his father about the war. In this essay he gives us stories that did not appear in his longer book. In short, Alex seeks to understand the role Nibley's participation in the war played in shaping the life of his father and how in the end Hugh Nibley became a pacifist. The narrative he presents and the stories he tells are remarkable.

Eight additional essays discuss further aspects of Hugh Nibley's scholarship, including Truman Madsen, "A Prodigy, an Enigma, and a Symbol" (387–400); Robert K. Thomas, "The Influence of Hugh Nibley: His Presence in the University" (401–406); Gary Gillum, "Hugh Nibley: Scholar of the Spirit, Missionary of the Mind" (407–22); Gordon Thomasson, "Matthew Black and Mircea Eliade Meet Hugh Nibley" (423–32); John Welch, "Hugh Nibley and the Book of Mormon" (433–50); Shirley Ricks, "Editing Hugh Nibley: The Man and His Legacy" (451–96); John Gee, "'A Stranger in a Strange Land': Hugh Nibley as an Egyptologist" (497–522); and William Hamblin, "Joseph or Jung?" (523–44).

Of these essays one of particular interest is by Shirley Ricks, "Editing Hugh Nibley." As an editor intimately familiar with his writing practices, Ricks gives a comprehensive assessment of Nibley's publications, including the reliability of his footnotes. Ricks reviews the importance of footnotes and the responsibilities of scholars and editors to be accurate. She reviews both her own experiences and the experiences of several of the source checkers of Nibley's footnotes through the decades. She concludes that while there is some truth to the accusation that Nibley's footnotes were sometimes sloppy, botched, or incomplete, there is plenty of data demonstrating that he did not misrepresent or fabricate them. Further, she addresses many of the specific critiques leveled at Nibley's footnotes and responds to each of these critiques with a persuasive defense of the integrity of Nibley's scholarship. She then reviews the many Nibley quotes through the years illustrating that he realized his scholarship, like all scholarship, was tentative and part of a developing conversation in search of the truth. This valuable article is a must-read for anyone who has experience dealing with Nibley's footnotes and for those who have heard the criticisms. She concludes her article with a review of the story of her involvement in each of the volumes of the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, which she edited and produced, often in direct collaboration with Hugh Nibley.

Part Three: Nibley, the Man is a collection of pieces that provide personal insights into Hugh's life and character. Here we are treated to never-before-published tributes presented at his funeral by his children as well as the funeral addresses of John W. Welch and President Dallin H. Oaks. Tributes and reminiscences round out the collection in this section. For me, this was the most enjoyable portion of the book. As I get older, I find I enjoy learning more from Nibley the man than Nibley the scholar.

The tributes given at his funeral by his children, accompanied by family photos, were a particular highlight. I was present at his funeral service. I was amazed at the distinct and diverse gifts and personalities of the Nibley children and how accomplished and brilliant they were in their individual spheres. They were, in many ways, both like their father and unlike him. My grandmother, Blanche Ellsworth Payne, was the wife of a bishop and a stake president in Seattle (Wilford Payne) and often had the chance to host visiting church authorities and speakers. She loved Brother Nibley, and she recorded in her memoirs a visit he made to her home when he came to present, as part of the Church-sponsored "Know Your Religion" series, classes that traveled to different parts of North America for many years. Here is what she recorded in her journal:

I was amazed at his teaching of his children. Never a minute without a teaching experience. On the drive from Utah, he taught them Spanish. Every day he gave them an assignment. At night, he told them stories from the Masters. They could quote Shakespeare, Chaucer, Tennyson and knew all the classics, operas, etc. Several times when we drove out, he never lost an opportunity to teach basic word spelling and meaning.¹

These words rang in my ears as I heard Nibley's children speak at his funeral. I was thrilled when Rebecca quoted from Shakespeare (555) and Christina from Rossetti (554). Michael quoted from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (561), and Zina quoted from Dylan Thomas (551–52). I particularly loved it when Alex said about his father:

We often disagreed, and he encouraged that. I disagreed with him because he raised me to. He loved to quote Isaiah: "Come now, let us reason together, saith the Lord" (Isaiah 1:18). We came much closer through our disagreements, and all

1. Blanche Ellsworth Payne, "Rocking Chair Memories: 1976–1986" (unpublished manuscript), 45–46. Copy in possession of author.

the really close friends of his life were people with whom he heartily and often disagreed. (557)

It is fun and instructive to read through the reminiscences of those who knew him. As time passes, the number of those who knew Brother Nibley personally grows smaller, and these written recollections are welcome. Many of these recollections resonate with the memories of we who also knew him. I empathized when John Welch quoted Robert K. Thomas, “Few students can talk coherently about their first class from Brother Nibley” (585), which perfectly captures our first experiences in his classroom.

As I read through the essays, I realized that some of them provide a larger perspective on Nibley than I experienced in my own sphere at BYU. For example, Louis Midgley describes his long relationship with Nibley through the years beginning in 1948. Midgley is especially interested in how Nibley interacted with the growing number of scholars and intellectuals both within and out of the Church who were challenging the traditional claims of the Restoration — including people like Sterling McMurrin and Fawn Brodie. Midgley also recollects Nibley’s interaction with prominent non-LDS scholars who came to speak at BYU — people like David Riesman (*The Lonely Crowd*), William Barrett (*Irrational Man: A Study in Existentialist Philosophy*), and Jacob Neusner (perhaps the most widely published Jewish scholar in history). These were the people writing the textbooks we were studying in our college classes. Nibley meaningfully interacted with scholars from a surprising variety of disciplines.

Within the pages of *Hugh Nibley Observed* are recorded many of the impressions of these scholars. For example, while not agreeing with Nibley on some things, Neusner acknowledges that “he struck me as a first-rate intellect” (450n35). After hearing Nibley lecture without notes and spontaneously quote thirty lines of a Greek poet from memory in a Biblical Society meeting, Jesuit George MacRae put his hands over his face and said, “It is obscene for a man to know that much” (389). On the other hand, Nibley himself was wont to say when he took part in such discussions, “None of us has any business being here. We don’t know enough” (391).

The essay “The BYU Folklore of Hugh W. Nibley,” by Jane Brady (631–96), is an invaluable collection of the many stories we passed around as students at BYU. Many of the stories told about Nibley, such as the story of his courtship and marriage, seem like folklore but in fact were very close to the truth. Many of us had personally experienced Nibley stories that would have seemed almost like folklore had we not witnessed

them ourselves. I think almost anyone will find a story in Brady's rich chapter that they haven't heard before.

The essays of reminiscences from his peers and students do remind me of the Nibley I knew.

This is a massive and delightful volume with many insights about Hugh Nibley the scholar and the man. It contains many valuable assessments of Nibley's contributions and looks in retrospect at the value and lasting significance of his scholarship. Even for someone who closely followed Nibley's life and scholarly writings, this book includes many precious observations, anecdotes, and evaluations that will give added insight into this remarkable person.

I should also mention that as a substantive supplement to the volume, the editors and their associates at the Interpreter Foundation, Book of Mormon Central, FAIR, and *Meridian Magazine* have been ambitiously posting weekly blog posts, video interviews, short videos, podcasts, and essays on different aspects of Nibley's life and work for nearly two months so far. The editors promise to make the most complete bibliography ever of Nibley's published and unpublished works available online in the near future as a joint project between the Interpreter Foundation and Book of Mormon Central. The Nibley Online Bibliography will be complete with downloadable documents, video, and audio versions. A higher-quality video version of *Faith of an Observer*, posted with subtitles that make some of Nibley's onscreen mumbles intelligible for the first time, is embedded within the first one of the blog post series.²

My final and lasting memory of Hugh Nibley was a chance to visit him in 2004 with a group of friends. We sang Happy Birthday to him on his 94th birthday. In fact, because Gary Gillum kept a journal, this event is recorded in the book on page 748. We had a grand time meeting briefly with him, while singing and sharing treats. Brother Nibley was confined to his bed — a sad thing for me to see since I was used to seeing him constantly in motion. He noted his lost ability to move as he would like. Then he said something like the following with a smile, "I can't wait to get to the other side! There we will be made whole, and we can continue to learn and grow and everything will become clear to us. I can hardly wait." More and more each day, I take comfort in his cheerful countenance in the face of the debilitating effects of old age. I'm

2. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, "Who Was Hugh Nibley?: Announcing a New, Landmark Book, 'Hugh Nibley Observed,'" *The Interpreter Foundation Blog* (April 1, 2021), <https://interpreterfoundation.org/blog-hugh-nibley-observed-1/>.

inspired by his faith in the reality of the afterlife and the renewal and joy he expected to find there. In their funeral tributes, several of his children talked about Hugh Nibley's last couple of years and his eagerness to continue his life on the other side. His daughter Zina recounted, "As he told my niece more than two years ago, 'Every night I go to bed thinking, 'This could be it! This could be the night. Tonight could be the night.' And every morning I wake up and think, 'Damn.' I think last Thursday [the day he passed away,] he woke up and said, 'Yeehaw!'" (549).

As I read through this book, I concur with John Welch when he said, "I feel like shouting hallelujah all the time when I think that I was so fortunate to ever know Hugh Nibley" (585).

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