



Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

Volume 25 | Number 1

Article 1

January 2005

Hugh Nibley Dies at 94

John Gee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights>



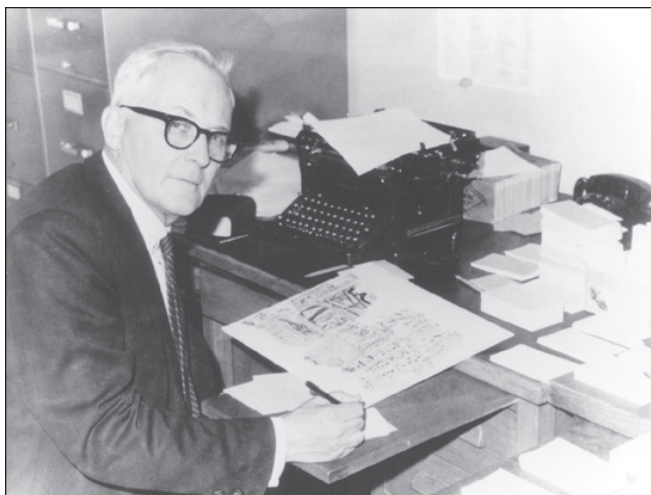
Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gee, John (2005) "Hugh Nibley Dies at 94," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 25: No. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol25/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



Hugh Nibley Dies at 94

By John Gee

Hugh Winder Nibley (27 March 1910–24 February 2005) was a gifted writer, a prolific author, a first-class scholar, and, above all, a committed member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Hugh was educated at UCLA (AB summa cum laude) and Berkeley (PhD in history). He taught at Claremont Colleges before World War II. During the war, he enlisted in the army and served in military intelligence; he was involved in combat on D day and in Operation Market-Garden. He correctly predicted the Battle of the Bulge. After the war, he was employed at Brigham Young University. For well over a half century, until his doctor ordered him to stop researching in 2002, he was a permanent fixture in the BYU library.

As a teacher, Hugh was overwhelming. He never insulted the student's intelligence by assuming that the student did not know the basics, and as a result his lectures assumed a broad and thorough general education on the part of students that few even approximated. His lectures were generally rapid-fire and tended to start when the students got in earshot and end when they left. His classes were infamous for their one-question essay finals, upon which the student's entire grade depended. Hugh was a fair grader who wanted to see his students thinking for themselves, but he did not believe in grade inflation; many students were surprised to find out the real quality of what they had been producing.

As a scholar, Hugh was able to make important contributions in numerous fields, including classics, ancient history, Mormon history, patristics, Book of Mormon studies, and Egyptology. Hugh insisted on

reading the relevant primary and secondary sources in the original and could read Arabic, Coptic, Dutch, Egyptian, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Old Norse, Russian, and other languages at sight. After years of grimly systematic reading, he was well familiar with the details of many subject areas but insisted on getting the big picture, without which the details were merely trivia.

As a writer, Hugh was blessed with an ability to turn a phrase and compose on tight deadlines. At the end of the 1960s, he was publishing an average of one and a half long, thoroughly researched scholarly articles each month. He had a ready, and sometimes biting, wit. He had the courage to publish on controversial and unpopular topics—like the futility of loyalty oaths in the midst of the McCarthy hearings. Above all, he realized that scholarship was not an end unto itself: “I sent out articles to a wide variety of prestigious journals and they were all printed. So I lost interest: what those people were after is not what I was after. Above all, I could see no point to going on through the years marshalling an ever-lengthening array of titles to stand at attention someday at the foot of an obituary. That is what they were all working for, and they were welcome to it” (“An Intellectual Autobiography,” in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley* [Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978], xxv). “What is worth saving will probably be saved, but that can't be very much and in this world it is vain to pin one's hopes on the survival of anything for long. What belongs to the eternities will not be lost; the rest does not interest me very much” (26 June 1981 letter to David H. Mulholland, quoted in Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* [Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 1992], 159).

Nibley shunned the spotlight. He never let himself be carried away by the accolades some accorded him. They were not important to him. He spent the last few years at home with his family and occasional well-wishers.

Through it all, he was absolutely committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and lived it with great consistency. His son-in-law Boyd Petersen wrote: “As a member of the Nibley family, I have had the opportunity to observe Hugh Nibley at close range for almost twenty years. . . . I have been astonished by his complete lack of materialism but equally astonished by his generosity. . . . I have likewise seen his deep commitment to the gospel. . . . And I have witnessed his deep faith in the Lord. While he certainly isn't perfect, Hugh Nibley is one of the most consistent people I have ever met” (*Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*, 409). ■