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Title A Reader's Library: Hugh Nibley: A Legend in His Own Time

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Abstract This review enthusiastically endorses Boyd Petersen's biography of his father-in-law, Hugh Nibley. Petersen intersperses narrative chapters with thematic ones in *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*.



A READER'S LIBRARY

Mary Lythgoe Bradford

Hugh Nibley: A Legend in His Own Time

It is tempting to call Boyd Jay Petersen's book *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002) a monument to a monument, but that would sound too much like a stone effigy, and this is a biography that lives and breathes with the verve and wit of its subject. As an artifact, it is a beautiful example of the bookmaker's art, with its mosaic portrait of Hugh Nibley on the cover and its smooth, readable typeface. The many photos add immeasurably to its beauty.

Boyd Petersen, Nibley's son-in-law, has written a personalized account that manages to be a professional and brilliant evocation of the life and times of one of Mormonism's most celebrated scholar-thinkers. When I say "one of," I find myself trying to come up with the names of others in his class. There are only a few who could stand with Nibley. Leonard Arrington once placed him in the company of Lowell Bennion and Sterling McMurrin, calling them the three "leading Mormon intellectuals of the late twentieth century." Arrington's taxonomy emphasized McMurrin as a defender of ideas, Bennion as a defender of people, and Nibley

as a defender of the faith. I don't disagree, but like most labels, these are too simplistic. As Bennion's biographer, however, I noticed many parallels in the lives of Bennion and Nibley, which can be summarized as a devotion to "the things that matter most."¹

As a biographer, I can only stand back and marvel at Boyd Petersen's achievement. At first, I read through all of the footnotes, thinking that they and likely other portions of the work could stand a bit of pruning. But upon reading further, I found myself unwilling to part with any part of the book, from its lengthy footnotes and quotations to its stunning photos and insightful commentaries.

Petersen's introductory chapter on Nibley's legendary status among Latter-day Saints is prefaced by a disarming essay by Hugh's daughter Zina, Petersen's wife. Her amusing "vignettes" from her life with her father will inspire readers to recall their own encounters with Nibley. Even I have Nibley vignettes to add. For example, I was present at the first East Coast *Sunstone* symposium, when, as described by Petersen, Nibley addressed 600 puzzled but admiring listeners (p. 398). We were so awed by his knowledge that we forgave him for being inscrutable. A few years later, when

I interviewed him for *Dialogue*, I was impressed with his purple running shoes and his satirical yet lovable personality. I was thrilled when he handed me a speech—one he had delivered on the occasion of the church's sesquicentennial—with the words, "I want you to publish this" (see "How Firm a Foundation! What Makes It So," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12 [winter 1979]: 29–45).

Petersen reports that, not long after entering the Nibley family circle, he noticed that no one seemed to be archiving the family records. He began the task as a service to his children, but soon realized that he was on the tip of an iceberg. When he dipped into the treasure house of letters Nibley had preserved—letters to and from his mother, his best friend, his children—Petersen realized that he had the makings of a first-rate biography. When Boyd and Zina Petersen came to study in the D.C. area, they became my helpful friends. As Boyd and I compared notes on the Bennion and Nibley projects, I realized that a son-in-law could write the definitive biography of a revered figure like Hugh. As a family member, Boyd had access to all of the records, all of the writings, and all of the relatives, friends, and

colleagues of this amazing man. The book's lively quality stems partly from the fact that "most of the information in this book comes from sources that have never seen print before" (p. xii), offering the authentic thrill that primary sources bring to the narrative.

In selecting a way to present the massive amount of information available to him, Petersen hit on the congenial plan of interspersing narrative chapters with thematic ones in "sort of a mosaic" (p. xii). As a result, the long recital of life events is broken up into manageable pieces of background information explaining how and why the themes of Nibley's life and thought developed as they did. The theme chapters could make a separate book, but they blend in well with the narrative ones and enliven them with portraits of Nibley as social critic, naturalist, and sharp wit. There are also chapters on his life of faith and his scholarship on the Book of Mormon, the Pearl of Great Price, and the temple. There is an astounding chapter on his pacifism. (I found his war experiences to be totally riveting, worthy of movie treatment.) Another chapter covers his relationship with the Hopi. Through this appealing organizational structuring, Petersen succeeds in his ambition to present a "coherent portrait of the man and his views on particular issues" (p. xii).

Nibley's ancestry is gracefully sketched—material that could have been tedious is presented creatively. The chapter on his Scottish heritage is framed by Nibley's last visit to his illustrious grandfather, Charles W. Nibley, presiding bishop of the church

and second counselor to President Heber J. Grant. The elder Nibley was a successful businessman who, ironically, advised Hugh to stay out of business. Hugh took his advice because he had inherited a respect and love for church leaders. In fact, his middle name, Winder, was bestowed after his mother received a blessing from John R. Winder, who was president of the Salt Lake Temple.

From that point on, the book is an exciting journey through Nibley's remarkable life. Accounts of his childhood and youth show his early talents for poetry, art, and scholarship combined with a love for the wilderness. Experiences with his family's lumber business led him to become an environmentalist who opposed the cutting of trees and even the killing of any living thing. He became a voice in the wilderness for the wilderness. As a young man he slept in the woods and still carries the scar from a wolf bite to show for it. One of his reasons for accepting an appointment to Brigham Young University was the attraction of the Wasatch Range and its healing qualities. He also grew to love the deserts of Utah and Arizona and the Hopi people who lived on the Third Mesa. Petersen believes that Nibley could have been a nature writer, for "the same drive and determination that pushed him to learn another language, or read another book, or write another article also pushed him to explore another canyon, climb another mountain, or hike another . . . trail" (p. 67). As an environmentalist, Nibley criticized industrial polluters, referred to the cutting of the redwoods as "a form of murder," and opposed

the sport of hunting. His warnings fell largely on deaf ears, Petersen observes.

Nibley's later service in the Army Air Force, during which he survived D-day on Omaha Beach and was exposed to the horrors of war on both sides of the war, made him a pacifist. Petersen writes that Hugh "witnessed the atrocities of the European campaign [and] later visited Dachau and German cities firebombed by the British. These scenes left him with memories so horrific that he refuses to talk of them to this day." The account of his military career is told mainly through eloquent letters. The astute chapter on Nibley as social critic grows naturally from his youthful experiences and military service. His writings have a prophetic quality, painting pictures of the future very much like scenes from the Book of Mormon and other ancient texts. His writings reveal his conviction that the scriptures are constantly teaching valid lessons for today.

When Nibley arrived on the BYU campus on May 25, 1946, he found a campus in the middle of a postwar boom. He was 36 and unmarried. Having survived a few failed romances, he was ready to take the advice of Elder John A. Widtsoe, who advised him to marry soon. In fact, Hugh went further by vowing that he would marry the first young woman he met on campus. She turned out to be Phyllis Draper, a student working in the housing office where he went to look for living quarters. Although she was 16 years younger than he, four months later they were married. Petersen paints the marriage as an inspired union, a true love

story that produced eight talented children whom Hugh described as “fun.” Like other fathers of the time, he was often distant, but it is clear that he delighted in their individual personalities.

Petersen’s informal writing style is a perfect fit for his subject. He describes Nibley’s works as a combination of “great depth and wisdom . . . with a certain ‘hipness’—youth and vitality that makes him fun. . . . Hugh Nibley combines both arcane tidbits from such sources as the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Patrologia with quotes from pop culture like ‘The Muppet Show’ or ‘Hill Street Blues.’ . . . This ability to put old things in context with the new was not only interesting, but entertaining” (p. xi).

Unafraid to look into certain controversial corners of Nibley’s life, Petersen succeeds in painting an affectionate picture while avoiding the hagiographer’s idealizing brush. He stays focused

on Nibley, touching only lightly on the lives of his children and allowing them considerable privacy. “While I have talked at great length with my brothers- and sisters-in-law, . . . I have included comments from them only when they focus on their father’s life,” writes Petersen, who adds that he fully respects their right to tell their own stories (p. xiv). He concludes that Nibley’s scholarly obsessions and his local celebrity status made him atypical of Latter-day Saint fathers but also gave his children a home “brimming with books, ideas, and conversation” (p. xv).

In summing up Nibley’s legendary qualities, Petersen sagely remarks:

Mormon culture . . . needed someone who stood for a combination of pure intellect and pure spirituality . . . untainted by commercial exploitation, academic poli-

tics, groupieism or trying to build a following. . . . Hugh not only fills that role but actually is that person. It’s not a mask. . . . This book is an effort to preserve the truth that lurks beneath these stories and to preserve the status of this hero in our culture. (pp. xxx–xxxix)

Writing this book was a labor of love for Boyd Petersen. Reading this book was a labor of love for me. Hugh Nibley has formulated a cohesive philosophy of life and death and a theology of faith that permeate this biography and make for enjoyable reading and reflection. Overarching this towering achievement is his wonderful sense of humor and a love of life that cuts through most of the doom-laden bombast of our time. His massive collected works are nearing completion. I recommend this biography as an indispensable companion to them. 📖

[A Reader's Library]

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1. One of Bennion's definitions of religion was paraphrased from the philosopher W. P. Montague through his student Sterling McMurrin: "Religion is the faith that the things that matter most will not ultimately be at the mercy of the things that matter least."⁹ Petersen publishes a letter from Nibley responding to a request from McMurrin for philosophical ideas about religion. Characteristically, Nibley bears his forceful testimony of the gospel in capital letters: "I KNOW THE GOSPEL IS TRUE" (p. 430).