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Abstract Review of *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (2002), by Boyd Petersen.

AN EXEMPLARY BIOGRAPHY

Don Norton

It was at one time a tradition, whenever a new volume of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* came off the press, for editors and other helpers to celebrate with pizza and root beer. Hugh and Phyllis would show up—Hugh registering his usual protests (he didn't like publicity, he didn't trust editors, he insisted that everything in the volume was passé, he'd rather be home with books, etc.) and writing pithy "signatures" in everybody's books. In short, he seemed embarrassed by all the attention.

At one point, someone handed him his personal copy. He became pensive as he turned the volume in his hands. And then he said, more to himself than to the group, I believe, "Who'd have ever thought all this stuff would ever see the light of day?" ("Stuff" was one of his favorite words.) So after all, despite his disclaimers, he *did* appreciate all the dedicated, often selfless tedium it took to bring his volumes to press (as many as two hundred hours might go into source checking only one volume).

I would like to think that he also appreciates Boyd Petersen's and the Nibley family's efforts to document his life and set the record straight. Had Hugh only had his say, it would probably have never been

Review of Boyd Petersen. *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*. Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2002. xxxi + 446 pp., with index. \$32.95.

written; but rumors are that he at least didn't get in the way of writing it, and on many occasions he even cooperated. His corrections and complaints have been minimal. Thus it is indeed an "authorized" biography, something many of us hoped but doubted would be written.

How fortunate that it was done by a family member, an "insider," as it were. Boyd Petersen, a son-in-law, frequently alludes to his twenty-year close association with Hugh and the family. A salient strength of the book is that it answers quite candidly a multitude of questions that readers may have posed and sets straight the many myths that inevitably surround someone so gifted and eccentric as Nibley. I, and many other avid readers of Nibley I've spoken to, greatly appreciate the personal context the book provides for the external Nibley we've all known over the years. The stories, the habits, the mannerisms, the knowledge, the productivity—they all now make much better sense, thanks to a framework into which we can fit them.

Some may construe the book as a premature eulogy, a piece of hagiography, another in a series of "saints' lives." An axiom applied to gifted people applies to the volume—that their weaknesses are as transparent as their endowments, and a few readers might have wished for a more "realistic" appraisal of the subject. Because of Nibley's competence, even skeptics and critics have been awestruck by the man's intellectual stature; his gifts and accomplishments are that unusual. (The number of people touched, intellectually and spiritually, by Nibley's word is frankly staggering—avid readers to teenagers through housewives to hard-core academics.)

What about his flaws? Petersen, I think, strikes a respectful and defensible balance in what he chooses to reveal and omit about Nibley. The difficult issues are handled well—acknowledged but not exploited. Tell-it-all biographies have been all too vogueish in the last few decades, a practice I find indefensible; and some critics have criticized biographies that sanitize Latter-day Saint notables. Mircea Eliade has something to teach us on this issue: in Eliade's historiography, Nibley—and all of us, for that matter—take our identities in archetypes (not in the Jungian sense), in "exemplary models," as expressed in myth and ritual among nearly all ancient and traditional

societies. The essence of humanness is not the fallen, but the redemptive potential of “everyman,” who finds identity in the re-creation, through repeated rehearsal of the myth and ritual, of the original acts of creation. The profane is to be assumed, not celebrated; it’s the sacred that’s “real” and thus warrants celebration.¹ It is the capacity of humans to become participants in events that link us to the other world, the “real world,” or as Nibley often stressed when he addressed the Saints, particularly our willingness to repent of human foibles, that dictates what should be recorded about humans. In the eternal scheme of things, human weaknesses (the profane) do figure, but they are not valid representations of what is more important in the human record. The scriptures follow this principle, and so does Petersen in his treatment of Nibley’s flaws. Thus a major lesson in the biography is that, given the gospel, we all do well to be “above” humanity’s flaws, “above” the petty concerns and institutions that consume the time and devotion of all too many of us. The Nibley biography is aptly subtitled “A Consecrated Life.” More important than Nibley’s gifts (there are many gifted among us) is his deeply personal commitment to use his gifts to defend his faith. In that sense, Nibley is no enigma, however unusual his habits and quirks. Those who know him well see and hear a consistent figure, accurately and more fully represented in the biography.

The biography is very accessible. I don’t know how it was written—from beginning to end, or chapter by chapter. It appears that Petersen followed the latter pattern, and it works well. Readers can dip into any chapter that strikes their interest. I myself read the chapters on World War II and the Hopis before other chapters.

Something is to be said for the quality of Boyd Petersen’s prose. First of all, it’s honest—and it’s highly individual, devoid of clichés, readable. Nibley himself is perhaps the master stylist, capable of the

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959); also, *The Sacred and the Profane* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 1959).

academic style, but also of a style easily accessible to the ordinary reader. He deserves to be remembered in polished prose.

I hope the biography revives interest in Nibley's writings. When he wrote for the *Improvement Era*, the *New Era*, and the *Ensign*, his name was well known in active Latter-day Saint households. In recent years, I find that only about one in ten of my current BYU students has read any of Nibley, and not many more even recognize the name. This is unfortunate, given Nibley's profound impact on Latter-day Saint scholarship over the last fifty years.

Nibley indeed was irritated by the people's constant demands on his time, as the book notes. I once knocked on the door to his long and narrow office in the Joseph Smith Building, intending to ask but a very brief question. Through the vent in the door, I heard a loud "Damn!" Hugh had just opened a window to let in a little air, and his carpet of papers faced the peril of draft. Still, he often gave his time freely. A forty-year-old student enrolled in a two-week seminar on campus innocently asked me if she could possibly meet Hugh Nibley. I cautioned her on how jealously he valued his time. But then who should be walking toward us, south of the library, but Nibley himself. I introduced my student, who fumbled out an awkward question. Nibley invited her to his office, and they spent the entire afternoon in conversation. The man that Boyd Petersen documents was quite capable of such selfless and personal acts.

Peterson gives us due access to the man behind the scholarship (a scholarly biography now begs to be written), a man as real as any of us, though greatly more gifted; one who excelled in learning and teaching the gospel—an exemplary consecrated life.