

## IN MEMORIAM

## HUGH WINDER NIBLEY

By Kevin L. Barney

*How are the mighty fallen!*

—2 SAMUEL 1:19

**H**UGH NIBLEY, DEAN of modern Mormon scriptural studies, passed away 24 February 2005, just shy of his ninety-fifth birthday. During his long and productive life, he attained the stature of Mormonism's pantheon of intellectual giants such as Orson Pratt, B.H. Roberts, James Talmage, and John Widtsoe. Yet, remarkably, he did so without ever holding any high ecclesiastical office. His scholarship, his writing, his teaching, his speaking, and, above all, the exemplary force of his remarkable life were the sources of his considerable authority among Latter-day Saints. Legions of *Nibleyophiles*, spanning three and four generations worldwide, count Hugh as someone who "blew their minds" and opened to them new ways of understanding the scriptures and other spiritual matters.

Hugh was the ultimate embodiment of Sunstone's motto (borrowed from St. Anselm), *fides quaerens intellectum*—"faith seeking understanding." Indeed, Hugh was a friend to the independent scholarly community at times when it was not popular to be so—but then popular convention was just about the last consideration ever to influence his thinking.

Hugh was born on 27 March 1910, in Portland, Oregon, to Alexander "El" and Agnes "Sloanie" Nibley, the second of their six children.<sup>1</sup> In 1926, the family moved to Glendale, California.

An early indication of Hugh's independent spirit and love of nature was the six weeks he spent by himself camping in the Crater Lake wilderness of Oregon with little

more than a bedroll, a canteen, and a bag of wheat and raisins. Except for an occasional ranger, he did not encounter another human being the whole time. He did encounter cougars, bears, and wolves, but he never felt in danger. He did recount hearing one ranger say to another when they met Hugh, "You know, I wouldn't sleep in there [the woods where Hugh had been sleeping] for a hundred dollars." On his way back to Medford to catch the bus to California, the canvas and crepe soles of Hugh's shoes finally gave out, and he walked the last forty miles barefoot.

From 1927 through 1929, he served an LDS mission to Germany (visiting Greece and Italy on the way home), sometimes sleeping under trees and subsisting by sucking on kernels of wheat he kept in his suit pocket. An undergraduate degree in history from UCLA in 1934 (*summa cum laude*) was followed by a Ph.D. in ancient history from Berkeley in 1938. Hugh wrote his dissertation, *The Roman Games as a Survival of an Archaic Year Cult*, during a six-week marathon, surviving on wilted carrots he purchased for a penny a bunch and canned milk for which he paid eight cents a can. Hugh then taught for several years at the Claremont Colleges, in Claremont, California. In 1942, he enlisted in the army, where he received training first in weather observation and then in military intelligence. On D-Day, Hugh was among the first to drive a jeep onto Utah Beach.

Following his return to the States, Hugh worked briefly at *The Improvement Era* in 1946 before John Widtsoe recommended him for a position at BYU. There he became an assistant professor of history and religion and also met his soon-to-be wife, Phyllis, in

the housing office. From this point until the end of his life, he became an iconic fixture on the Provo campus.

**T**HE story of Hugh's contributions to Mormon thought is told mainly through his publications.<sup>2</sup> The list runs to more than 250 items, and many were serial articles, which, if counted individually, would push the number much higher. Many publications from early in his career, though always infused with his Mormon sensibilities and usually with at least tangential Mormon relevance, were not on specifically LDS subjects. These include "New Light on Scaliger" (published before his entrance to World War II) and "Sparsiones," in the *Classical Journal*; "The Hierocentric State," "The Unsolved Loyalty Problem," and "Tenting, Toll, and Taxing," in *Western Political Quarterly*; "*Victoriosa Loquacitas*: The Rise of Rhetoric and the Decline of Everything Else,"<sup>3</sup> in *Western Speech*; "Christian Envy of the Temple," in *Jewish Quarterly Review*; "The Passing of the Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme," in *Church History*; "Qumran and the Companions of the Cave," in *Revue de Qumran*; "*Evangelium Quadragesima Dierum*," in *Vigiliae Christianae*; and "Jerusalem: In Christianity," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*. If Hugh's aim had been worldly academic success, he could have simply kept rolling out titles like these.

But simply piling up academic publications was too easy, too pedestrian, and too meaningless for Hugh. As he recalled:

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.<sup>4</sup>

Hugh was interested not in intellectual pedantry but in matters of ultimate religious significance. So he directed most of his writing not to the academic marketplace, but to the Saints themselves, both as a consecration of his talents to the Church he so loved, and also perhaps because plowing new ground in LDS scripture was a far greater challenge (not to mention more interesting and just plain fun) than joining the ever-growing ranks of the scholarly orthodox. Anyone with a little knowledge of Greek and Hebrew could call himself a Bible scholar, but to turn the Book of Mormon into a fertile

and flowering field of academic study in its own right required the rarefied genius that few in this world possess.

Hugh's initial foray into directly apologetic material came in the wake of Fawn Brodie's 1945 biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*, with his cleverly titled 1946 rejoinder, *No Ma'am, That's Not History: A Brief Review of Mrs. Brodie's Reluctant Vindication of a Prophet She Seeks to Expose*. Like much of Hugh's work, from half a century's remove, this is a very dated effort that has been superseded by more mature Mormon historical scholarship. Indeed, I would not claim that LDS history was ever one of Hugh's particular strengths, at least judged by today's standards. But for many in the Church, this book was their first introduction to Hugh's grounded faith as expressed by means of his rapier wit. Pity the poor soul who found himself engaged in a battle of wits with Hugh! Although Hugh wrote a few other generally apologetic pieces, such as *The Mythmakers* (1961) and *Sounding Brass* (1963), most of his work was focused on the peculiar scriptures of Mormonism.

Hugh's greatest achievement therein is probably his work on the Book of Mormon. In the first half of the twentieth century, interest in and study of the Book of Mormon had waned and was demonstrably at an all-time low.<sup>5</sup> Almost single-handedly, Hugh changed that with a number of lengthy *Improvement Era* serials, which were later published in book form, resulting in a trilogy of sorts. First was *Lehi in the Desert*, followed by *The World of the Jaredites* (which were combined as a single book). Second came *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, which became the 1957 Melchizedek Priesthood Study Guide, a somewhat controversial choice since it was written at a level clearly over the heads of most Church members. (President McKay personally authorized its use as a guide, reasoning that the Saints could "reach for it.") The third contribution to this trilogy was *Since Cumorah* (my personal favorite).

In his approach, Hugh followed in the footsteps of Sidney B. Sperry, studying the Book of Mormon as any other text from antiquity. But he did so with prodigious scholarly tools, linguistic control, depth, rigor, outright flair, and his omnipresent sense of humor. He actually made Book of Mormon



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE NIBLEY FAMILY

studies fun and interesting, something that not long before had seemed impossible.<sup>6</sup>

Hugh's influence was also significant in studies of the Book of Abraham. When a portion of the Joseph Smith Papyri was recovered from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in November 1967, most LDS scholars were limited to writing about the history of the papyri, for they lacked the tools necessary to study the papyri directly. Hugh no doubt was not as prepared as he would have liked to have been, and he never considered himself an Egyptologist *per se* (he was always more a generalist in ancient history). But he had previously studied both Egyptian and Coptic (a Christian-era form of the Egyptian language) and had recently returned from a sabbatical

year (1966–67) of advanced study of Egyptian under John A. Wilson and Klaus Bauer at University of Chicago's Oriental Institute. From January 1968 through May 1970, Hugh published a lengthy serial in the *Improvement Era* called "A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price." These articles began with a review of the 1912 Spalding pamphlet (an indirect attack on the Book of Mormon in the form of a direct attack on the Facsimiles and their published interpretations). Hugh then continued with a study of Facsimile 1 from the Book of Abraham. He also published a dozen or so additional articles on Book of Abraham topics, many in the pages of *BYU Studies*. In 1975, he published *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, a translation of and commentary on the Book of Breathings. (In the not too distant future, this book will be reissued by FARMS as part of the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley series). He then published *Abraham in Egypt* (1981), which is largely devoted to comparing the Book of Abraham with other ancient Abraham texts and to studying Facsimile 3. His final contribution to Book of Abraham studies will be *One Eternal Round*, a study of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus (Facsimile 2), to be published posthumously by FARMS.

His published writings are so extensive that it is impossible to do them even minimal justice in so brief a summary. Other topics he treated include temples, the Old Testament, the early Church, patristics, and Brigham Young. A publication remarkable for where it appeared as much as for its content is his long serial, "A Strange Thing in the Land: The Return of the Book of Enoch," which was published in the *Ensign* and surely will be the first, last, and only such long, heavily footnoted serial ever to appear in that publication.

Those not interested in his scriptural writings could investigate yet another class of his speaking and writing that consists of vigorous social commentary (especially directed against contemporary Mormon culture), which for some readers is his most compelling work. Hugh was a rare combination: a faithful Mormon, unquestionably loyal to the Church and its leading brethren, but he was also a liberal, a Democrat, an environmentalist, a pacifist, and an anti-materialist. Because of his unquestioned loyalty, he could

get away with trenchant social commentary that others could not. In this respect, he wrote and spoke much like a prophet of Israel, calling the people to repentance from a position of great moral authority. Unfortunately, his preaching along these lines has had only a modest influence among the Mormon *hoi polloi*, but I count myself among those who have been positively influenced by his social and cultural critiques. For the reader unfamiliar with this aspect of Hugh's writing, I highly recommend the *Approaching Zion* volume of the Collected Works series as an excellent entree.

**L**IKE most Saints, I encountered Hugh not up close and personal, but mostly from afar. My first introduction to him was in early 1978, while on my mission in Colorado. Many missionaries there had developed a fascination with the Dead Sea Scrolls, a fascination my training companion imparted to me by osmosis. Once, when visiting a member family, I noticed the cover of a book that had a picture of what I instantly recognized as a scroll jar. It turned out to be *Since Cumorah*.

I recognized the name "Nibley," because as a boy, I had read a children's book written by Preston Nibley, an Assistant Church Historian and Hugh's uncle. I dimly recall my father's telling me how much he respected Preston's relative named Hugh. That comment had meant nothing to me until that moment visiting the member family with *Since Cumorah*, when I first encountered this "Hugh." My member acquaintance lent me the book, and I quickly devoured it. It was unlike any Church literature I had ever encountered, and it piqued my interest in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon was always one of Hugh's favorite books, but it had never been one of mine, and to this day, it still really is not. (I am the perhaps rare Latter-day Saint who much prefers the Bible to the Book of Mormon.) The extent of my enjoyment and appreciation of the Book of Mormon is largely due to Hugh's own infectious enthusiasm for it as imparted through his writings.

I was off to the races. While still on my mission, I obtained several of Hugh's books and taped lectures, including *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* and *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, which I bought on sale from a Seventies bookstore not really knowing what it was, but just because it looked interesting. I even read the thing, which makes me one of only about twelve people in the Church to actually do so (I exaggerate only slightly). Although Saints of an older generation usu-



ally cut their Nibley teeth on *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites*, I did not obtain that book until inheriting my father's copy following his death in 1980.

Reading Hugh naturally led me to the material in his footnotes, much of which was, of course, written by non-LDS authors. So I began to purchase and read key scholarly texts. (I do not recall whether we missionaries at that time were supposed to limit our reading to a list of certain semi-official Mormon texts, but if we were, I conveniently ignored that rule.) Before long, I was schlepping a whole trunk of books during transfers.

Although I am a little embarrassed to acknowledge this, while still on my mission, I wrote several research papers on different tractates of the Nag Hammadi Codices. I typed them up on an old typewriter we had in one area. They were awful, partly because I was still so young and lacking formal education, but partly, too, because I was trying to

imitate Hugh's writing style. To grow as a scholar, I found that I had to abandon that conceit and find my own voice. I can always tell when a young Mormon has been over-influenced by Hugh and tries to write like him. His was a great style, but one that is inimitable by anyone lacking his fundamental genius, a class into which most of us fall.

I was also favorably impressed with Hugh's control of languages and saw what a difference it made when I compared his work with that of writers who commented on texts they could not read in the original tongues. As a result, while on my mission, I began to teach myself bits and pieces of Hebrew and Greek, using such tools as I had at my disposal, such as a Berlitz Hebrew reader, a *Strong's Concordance*, and a Jehovah's Witnesses interlinear.

When I got to BYU, I started in economics but ended up majoring in classics, studying Latin and Greek, and also Hebrew and Coptic (though never the full array of languages Hugh controlled). True, I ended up in law school, but studying ancient languages is a decision I have never regretted, and the experience has been a blessing and a joy to me to this day. Most of my teachers had been Hugh's students, and most of my friends had been similarly influenced to study the ancient world because of their exposure to Hugh and his writings.

I never took a class from Hugh (competition to get into his classes was fierce), but if he gave a lecture while I was on the Provo campus—boom, I was there!

**T**HE following are just a few anecdotes about my personal encounters with the man:

- I used to study in the Ancient Studies Reading room on the fourth floor of the Lee library at BYU, just on the other side of the wall from the Ancient Studies office. Hugh had a secretary, but he usually typed his own papers on an IBM selectric in the office. I would regularly hear a steady stream of mild epithets coming from the other side of the wall as he tried to get the typewriter to bend to his will. I got quite a kick out of the idea of Hugh's typing some spiritual paper on the temple while cursing a modestly blue streak at his typewriter.

- When I was studying classics, for a period of time, a group of us would gather to study in a stairwell not far from the Ancient Studies office. One time, Hugh shuffled up the stairs while we were reading Latin poetry. He asked what we were reading. We replied,

“Catullus.” He got a far-off look in his eye and a smirk on his face, then gave out a little laugh, and said, “Ahhh, Catullus.”

I realize this story is funny only if you have ever read any Catullus, but suffice it to say that were his poetry not written in Latin, the BYU administration would never allow it on campus!

- Another time, *Eta Sigma Phi*, the classics honor society, went into the mountains for a picnic, and Hugh came along. He was always a great supporter to those of us studying classics. I hadn't known then about his prodigious love for the outdoors, but I learned from that trip how much he relished being in nature. He was really in his element, hiking around, picking up sticks, examining things, and no one bugging him. That was probably as happy as I ever saw him.

- At a conference attended by a number of prestigious non-LDS scholars, Hugh was to give the keynote address in the auditorium of the old Joseph Smith Building. Truman Madsen introduced Hugh and waxed rhapsodic about Hugh's many remarkable intellectual abilities. Included in his litany was Hugh's being able to recite extensively from Ovid in Greek. Another speaker might have let it go, but not Hugh. As soon as he reached the podium, he remarked, almost under his breath, that “reciting Ovid in Greek would be quite a trick!” He did not bother to explain, assuming that most of his audience would know that Ovid actually wrote in Latin.

- On another occasion, I went to hear Hugh lecture at the Smith Family Living Center. Later that same evening, Hugh's brother Reid was giving a piano recital across campus, and at the conclusion of his remarks, Hugh hopefully suggested that the audience should rise *en masse* and troop over to the recital, which was obviously what Hugh wished to do. Alas, it was not to be. After the speech, as was typical, Hugh was quickly surrounded by a gaggle of Saints, asking him innumerable questions. I am embarrassed now to admit that I was one of them, and this was the one time I actually asked him a question. I asked Hugh what he thought of Archbishop Usher's biblical chronology. He took just a moment to gain his bearings, then responded that Bishop Usher was a good man who did the best he could with limited information. I thought it was a great answer, I suppose because it accorded with my own opinion. But in retrospect, I really wish we had gotten Hugh to that piano recital.



- FARMS is currently engaged in a long-term project to publish virtually every word Hugh ever wrote. I confess that, except for *Approaching Zion*, I do not own any of the FARMS Nibley volumes, mainly because I already have most of the stuff in the original editions. Some may question the wisdom of reprinting it all, and there are probably things in his corpus that Hugh would just as soon not see the light of day again. But I can fully understand and sympathize with the sentiment, for when I was at BYU, before Al Gore invented the Internet, we used to trade and collect Nibley writings on what was called the Mormon Underground. And, of course, like boys trading baseball cards, we wanted them all. I remember in one instance being particularly pleased to acquire an unpublished treatment of the three Facsimiles, which someone had acquired from the office files by uncertain means. (I knew enough not to ask too many questions but simply to enjoy the fruits of these labors.)

MY personal stories about Hugh are not particularly important nor meaningful to anyone but myself. And there are undoubtedly many thousands of Saints who have similarly personal but meaningful-to-them stories of interactions, small and great, in print or in person, with this remarkable man. That so many people treasure even small interactions with Hugh is a testament to his tremendous influence in the Church. Perhaps Hugh's greatest legacy is the battalion of scholars and students following in his footsteps. Among these are the hundreds of scholars who participate in the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, which in some sense is a club for Nibleyophiles—a club to which I am happy and proud to belong. The wonderful Sunstone Symposium roast of Hugh in 2003, which he was unfortunately unable to attend due to illness, is another indication of the breadth of his influence in the Mormon community.

Hugh is survived by his wife Phyllis, their children: Paul, Christina, Thomas, Michael, Alexander, Rebecca, Martha, and Zina; twenty-four grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. On behalf of the Sunstone community, I extend deepest condolences to the Nibley family. We join them not only in mourning his loss but also in celebrating his life and influence, which will be felt for generations yet to come.

#### NOTES

1. In birth order, the Alexander and Agnes Nibley children are: Alexander, Hugh, Fred, Philip (who died at age 14), Reid, and Barbara. Reid and Barbara both survive Hugh. The various bibliographical details in this essay derive from Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002).

2. Bibliographical details in this essay derive from Louis Midgley, comp., “Hugh Winder Nibley: Bibliography and Register,” in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret and FARMS, 1990), xv–lxxxvii.

3. This essay was deeply ironic in that Hugh was himself a master rhetorician.

4. Hugh W. Nibley, “An Intellectual Autobiography,” in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh Nibley* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), xxv.

5. See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 6–47.

6. For an appreciation of Hugh's Book of Mormon studies, see John W. Welch, “Hugh Nibley and the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, April 1985, 50–56.

## IN MEMORIAM

## REMEMBERING HUGH NIBLEY

TO TREASURE  
THE SACRED

**M**Y FIRST MEMORY of Hugh Nibley is thinking as a child, “How could anyone be so white?” He was the first white man I had ever met. He looked as if he had never been exposed to direct sunlight. He shaded his head with a wide-brimmed cotton hat and wore two pair of glasses at a time—sunglasses over his regular prescription lenses.

My parents were Palestinian-Arab immigrants who raised eight children in Provo, Utah. We lived on a farm less than a mile from the mouth of Rock Canyon. My father had worked his way by railroad across America peddling housewares and rugs, ultimately reaching Utah before the outbreak of World War I. He joined the U.S. Army, lost his hearing in the war, and came back to Utah a disabled veteran. His war service and disability earned him a homestead, where he built a fruit farm, eventually brought my mother [from where?], and tried to integrate all of us kids into Mormon/Utah society.

My parents remained devout Muslims throughout their lives, praying five times a day at our home or while working in the fields near where the Provo LDS temple currently stands. From their earliest days in Utah, Hugh took an interest in my parents, visiting them and learning about our culture. He even mentioned them in a footnote in his book, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites*.

I must have been seven or eight when I first met him in 1950 or '51. He drove a group of us kids, including some of his own, to Deer Creek Dam. We stopped at a scenic turnout while he explained the environmental attributes of the layers that could be seen on a receding reservoir. I did not have a clue what he was talking about, but his en-

thusiasm kept our attention glued to his discourse.

Hugh enjoyed practicing his Arabic with me and my brothers. We spoke a colloquial Palestinian village dialect, while he spoke formal classical Arabic, so we exchanged new words and different pronunciations. When I was in junior high school, my father arranged for Hugh to come to our house one night a week with his small blackboard and chalk to teach four of us Kader boys to read and write Arabic. We were miserable failures in language studies, but he kept our attention. It was interesting enough to have a strange white man speak Arabic with us, but Hugh also offered a new story or historic fact for every name, letter, noun, and verb form.

My parents thought Hugh was some form of sacred personality, so we naturally thought so, too. He treated us as if we were wonderful, interesting artifacts from a lost age. My dad had long discussions with Hugh about biblical history, the Quran, the Book of Mormon, and prophets, both ancient and modern. Hugh treated Dad with patience and respect, partly because Dad was deaf from the war, but also because he was a devout Muslim who had memorized the Quran. They shared the idea that all religions are interesting and sacred.

Hugh visited Palestine around 1962, at the same time Dad took us all home to try to marry us off to our cousins. (Our parents worried that we might marry Mormons and leave the Muslim faith—which actually happened in a couple of cases). Hugh later told me about a tour he and Dad took to the Qumran caves. One could write a very funny book comparing Dad’s point of view and Hugh’s interpretation of the caves and scrolls. Hugh discussed the historic significance of the material found in the caves, while Dad described the meaning of it all from the perspective of a person who, as a child in

Turkish-occupied Palestine, had learned the history of the Middle East from storytelling sessions around the fire.

**W**HEN I was about nineteen, I expressed an interest in joining the LDS church. (Perhaps I wanted to fit in with the dominant culture.) Hugh grilled me on central doctrinal questions in Mormonism, and I quickly failed this oral exam. He did not exhibit any missionary zeal about the possibility of my conversion but told me to take my time, think about it, and learn a few basic facts about Christianity first. So I learned more, studied, and a few years later, I did join the Church.

In 1963, Hugh arranged for my admission to BYU. He literally took me by the hand, walked me to the admissions office, and told the women at the counter, “Admit this boy.” They gave me forms to fill out on the spot, and a week later, I went back to learn from the admissions staffer, “We are admitting you because Brother Nibley has asked us to.” So there I was among the Mormons: a Muslim, a Palestinian-Arab, and a native of Provo, Utah, who was active in the Democratic Party of Utah.

When I started school, I didn’t know anyone on campus, so I spent time with Hugh in his office being tutored and mentored. I signed up for his religion class designed for non-Christian students. We referred to the class as “Book of Mormon for Heathens.” He taught us LDS doctrine in the context of other world religions, taking great care to make sure we all had a source of comparison from our various religions to similar doctrines in Mormonism. Everything he taught made me want to know more. His lectures always left me wondering why I was wasting so much time when there was so much to learn. He was compassionate, empathetic, and always curious. He was devout in his convictions, loyal to Church leaders and the doctrine, but always questioning and searching for answers. His interest in ancient forms of worship and the lessons we could learn from them tidbit by tidbit, artifact by artifact, taught us to read sacred texts with care.

**F**ROM childhood to maturity, I viewed Hugh as a member of our family. He spoke at my brother’s, and later my dad’s, funeral, and we would often consult him on family problems. When I left my teaching post at BYU to move to Washington, D.C., he gave a farewell speech which included a lengthy historical analysis of the

roots of my surname from biblical times to the present, and then taught about all the peoples who had lived in Palestine from the beginning of time. He concluded that the blood of all who had ever lived in Palestine coursed through my veins. My friends in the local chapter of Utah County Democrats who had come to the farewell dinner to bid me and my wife goodbye, ended up listening to a serious discourse on ancient history and my connection to it for well over an hour.

On my trips back to Utah, I always visited Hugh, who would start every conversation as if I had just visited the day before. He would dive right into his current research, explaining in detail his new findings. I would always try to pay attention, though my eyes would often glaze over in wonderment at this marvelous man's unending enthusiasm for the mysteries of ancient history and their connection to our lives today.

**M**Y fondest memory of Hugh is of working with him to publish a series of articles on Brigham Young's views about war and preserving the environment in the *BYU Young Democrat*, a newsletter for our campus organization. The articles were printed in 1970, during the height of the furor over the Vietnam War, and much to the chagrin of the BYU administrators, whose job it was to keep even the scent of war protests out of campus life. I was president of the Young Democrats, and, because Hugh was one of us, it didn't even occur to me that anything we did or thought was politically radical. All publications had to be submitted for approval by school officials, and many in the administration tried to block ours. However, they could not easily censor the commentary of the renowned Hugh Nibley. When Hugh contributed his articles, I always enjoyed watching the faces of certain administrators turn red when they realized how anti-war Hugh's articles were.

Hugh was not only a compassionate Christian, he was also a courageous and devout Mormon. He had strong opinions about war, wealth, and preserving the environ-



ment, and he expressed them publicly and often. He was not a fair-weather Democrat, either. During one of the U.S. Senate campaigns, he volunteered to go knocking on doors in Provo with senatorial candidate Ted Wilson, the former mayor of Salt Lake City, and Robert Redford, the movie star. The three of them went trudging the neighborhoods of Provo drumming up votes for Wilson. Hugh knew and supported Wilson, but we had to explain to him who Robert Redford was.

**I** CHERISH the time I spent with Hugh Nibley because he challenged me to think about important things, to treasure the sacred, and to always work to be compas-

sionate. He remained a defender of those who struggle for a livelihood as well as those who struggle with their faith, or lack of it, or for a better grasp of their purpose in this existence. He urged me to always remember that the human soul is capable of being small and petty, but that it can also expand to such heights that it can conquer any challenge imaginable.

Hugh was a Christian in the most fundamental way, a compassionate man who ignored material things and gave very generously of his time and intellect. He was never impressed with worldly or Church leaders as leaders but instead measured them by a scale whose values connected to the ancient truths which motivated his interests. All in all, he preferred to make his way among the common folk. The world is a better place because of Hugh Nibley, and we are all enriched for having had his influence in our lives.

OMAR KADER  
Vienna, Virginia

## LEADING THE PROCESSION

**G**ORDON THOMASSON, one of Hugh Nibley's brightest students and one who shares at least a part of Hugh's vast intellectual curiosity, reports that Hugh really enjoyed only one of the many introductions he was given during the years of his distinguished career. That was when the master of ceremonies at some BYU event introduced Hugh

by simply quoting a note pinned to the bulletin board of the Honors library: "Hugh Nibley Reads Graffiti." Hugh Nibley recognized that, as Simon and Garfunkel note, words of wisdom are written on the subway walls and tenement halls, as well as on ancient plates and scrolls. He seemed to have read everything. Why not graffiti?

Hugh Nibley was one of the most powerful figures of the modern church, a larger-than-life character who wielded enormous influence. When I took his Pearl of Great Price course at BYU in the late '50s, he was already a legend and a folk figure of real and imagined dimensions. Mythology, both that which he studied and that which he created,

seemed to follow him much like the dust that swirls around Pigpen, the character in the Charlie Brown comics (an allusion that would not have been lost on Nibley!).

Hugh was devoted to BYU, yet he remained its most astute and outspoken critic. His essay "Zeal without Knowledge" is to my mind the best indictment of what sometimes passes for intellectual inquiry not only at BYU but at many universities. "True knowledge never shuts the door on more knowledge, but zeal often does." "The University is nothing more nor less than a place to show off." Hyperbole to be sure, but Nibley's hyperbolic statements always had a kernel of truth and were carefully crafted and calculated to get our attention.

Nibley's observations about the lack of intellectual curiosity among BYU students and the shallowness of knowledge among some of his colleagues were revealed to me some forty years ago. While students at BYU, some friends and I organized a study group called the Saturday Morning Intellectual Breakfast Club. The only accurate part of the name was that we met on Saturday mornings and had breakfast together. It was our custom to invite professors to join us for breakfast in the cafeteria of the Joseph Smith building so that we could "pick their brains." The morning we invited Hugh, it

was quickly evident to him (and more slowly to us) that none of us had enough brains to pick his. I remember distinctly Hugh's response to one question:

"Exactly how many languages do you know, Brother Nibley?"

"Just the necessary ones."

"Which ones are those?"

"Just the ones you need to know to get along."

After a few more such inane questions, Hugh said, rather kindly and charitably, "You have to know what questions to ask. By asking the right questions, you can immediately find out how little any member of this faculty knows."

All of his life, Hugh Nibley asked the right

questions, many of them uncomfortable ones. He also provided answers—informative, comprehensive, sometimes entertaining, and often filled with footnotes! Nibley knew so much that he saw correspondences everywhere. Although some have criticized his use of parallels, what few have recognized is how particularly apt many of his parallel arguments are. If he had a tendency to see too many parallels, he knew so much about so many things that it was difficult for him not to draw our attention to those he considered relevant. And, it is safe to say, it is doubtful that any of his contemporaries, certainly not any of his Mormon contemporaries, knew or knows enough to challenge Nibley on most subjects. It reminds me of those who criticized the great Harvard Shakespearean scholar, George Lyman Kittridge, for not get-

ting a doctorate. He responded, "Pray, who would examine me?"



ting a doctorate. He responded, "Pray, who would examine me?"

When I was editing the now-famous *Dialogue* issue on Mormonism's "Negro Problem," which included Lester Bush's landmark study on the history of this doctrine, Hugh was one of three people I asked to respond. Of all of the things he had to say, none impressed me as much as the following:

I have always been furiously active in the Church, but I have also been a non-conformist and have never held any *office* of rank in anything; I have undertaken many assignments given me by the leaders, and much of the work has been any-

mous: no rank, no recognition, no anything. While I have been commended for some things, they were never the things which I considered most important—that was entirely a little understanding between me and my Heavenly Father, which I have thoroughly enjoyed, though no one else knows anything about it.

**H**UGH was able to remain a nonconformist in a very conformist church while also remaining one of its most faithful members. This, I believe for three reasons: (1) his vast knowledge intimidated everyone; (2) he did not value the things that most people value (money, prestige, position, and power); and (3) his devotion was second to none. Truman Madsen speaks of Hugh's "colossal erudition" and his "breath-taking assurances of faith." That is, Nibley was just as comfortable going to the temple as he was to the library, and went to both often. In fact, he saw them as inextricably connected, as his writing on the temple over his lifetime attests. And unlike some of us who go to the temple, he stayed awake and paid attention. He once remarked that he learned something new every time he went to the temple. He may be the only one who could make that statement.

Hugh has had his critics over the years, but unlike most of them, he was his own best critic. He knew enough to know what he didn't know, and he knew enough of his own limitations to put caveats with his own conclusions.

In his satire on the Christian view of heaven, "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven," Mark Twain avers that those who rank highest in heaven are not the world's luminaries but the humble and unheralded. Those leading the procession are the unexpected—"a common tailor from Tennessee," "a horse doctor from Afghanistan," and "a shoemaker . . . from the back settlements of France." I imagine among this procession of heaven's highest, a peripatetic, gadfly scholar

of ancient studies from Provo, Utah. He will be ambling along, a stack of note cards in hand, scarcely noticing that he is being ushered into the presence of the Lord. As he looks up in surprise, I can't imagine anyone for whom it will be easier for the Savior to say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into my rest."

ROBERT A. REES  
Brookdale, California

## A CONTINUING IMPRESSION

WHILE I WAS on my mission in England in 1975, a member of the Kendall branch lent me his worn copy of Hugh Nibley's *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*. On my next P-day, I took it to the bath with me, deciding to browse the chapters at random to see if there was anything interesting.

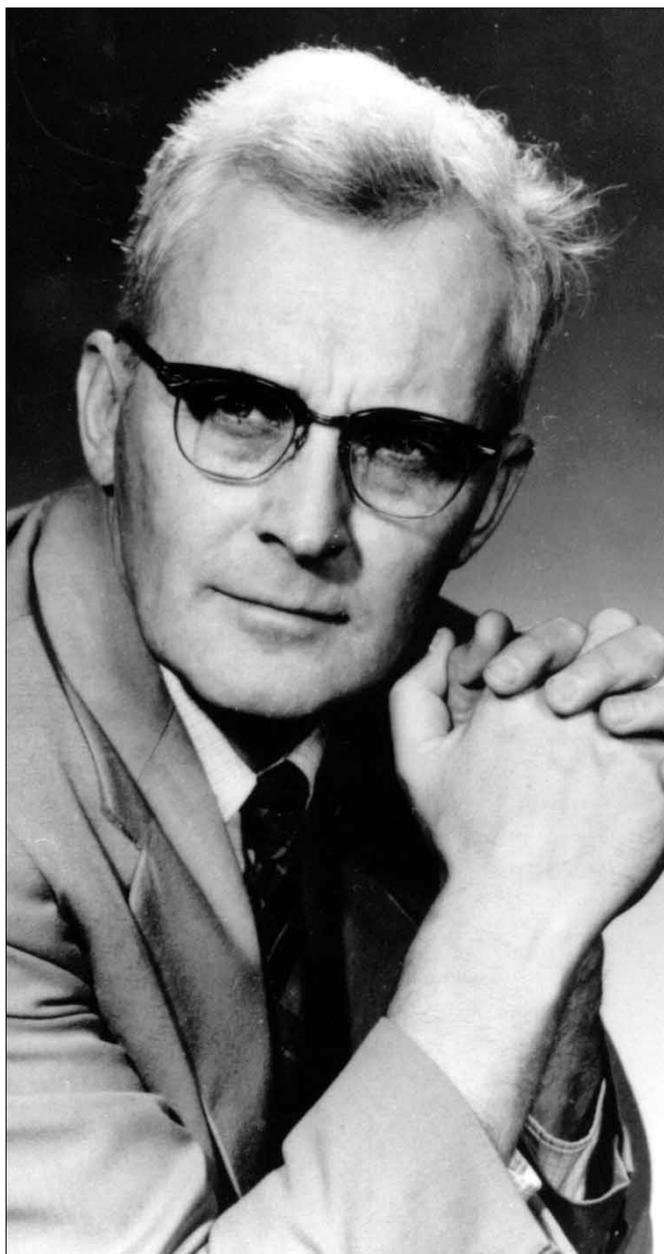
I came across the chapter on "Old World Ritual in the New World," which compared King Benjamin's discourse with ancient coronation rituals. About a year before, an investigator had challenged me on the text, saying that it seemed unreal and unbelievable that *everyone* would make the covenant, that *everyone* would cry out in one voice. Surely, he reasoned, not everyone would have gone along with it.

At the time, I did not have an answer, and so filed the question away on my back burner. But here in this chapter was the answer!

King Benjamin's discourse was a ritual occasion, and all knew their parts. So of course everyone cried out in one voice and made the covenant. Every chapter had something mind-expanding and showed me how much more we can get out of a text if we bring more to it. And I learned that if I gave my questions time and kept my eyes open, answers would be forthcoming.

When I got home from my mission, I started chasing down books, then magazine articles, then journal articles in the libraries, finally exhausting those outlets just about the same time FARMS started up and more treasure came to light.

I never met Brother Nibley himself (though I was seated at the table next to



where he would have been sitting at the 2003 Sunstone Roast), but thirty years of reading his books has made a continuing impression on me, for which I am very grateful.

KEVIN CHRISTENSEN  
Bethel Park, Pennsylvania

## HEARING NIBLEY

AT BYU CIRCA 1968, the best entertainment (a mixture of exhilarating originality, challenging questions, and faithful peacefulness) was to be found in the almost weekly firesides that one could crash to hear Hugh Nibley. My taste for his irony, humor, criticism, and interconnecting

holism had been acquired over years of reading him in *The Improvement Era*.

I sensed that his drive to surprise us with things as they "really are" came from his ironic knowledge that this world at its best is stale and unprofitable—which can only be said if we have a prior knowledge (albeit veiled) of a world that is lively and fruitful. He always seemed to point hopefully to the healing resurrection and reconciliation which Christ had brought us and to which Joseph Smith's revelations and the Restoration were the best witness. In sum, he believed in a better country where we could all live as sons and daughters of God doing creative things forever.

Nibley's particular delight in putting intellectuals in the same boat as any working person was refreshing. He taught me to enjoy serious study the way I enjoyed skiing or a good play: to take it no more or less seriously than other good things in life. He also persuaded me that the best things in life have, in many respects, already been done (the City of Enoch being exhibit A) and that human history was not designed so much as continual progress as a continual test of faith, hope, and love. The veil made sure each generation had to deal with a test of uncertainty about what mattered most. Whether in 4000 B.C. or 2000 A.D., one still had to choose whom to trust and which way to go. The end would be a knowing with God and others wherein call-

ings and elections were made sure. In a universal drama, the final act of this play would reveal first, that persons were immortal after all and, second, that they would actually enjoy wonderful expanding friendships forever as members of God's family.

In conviction that Hugh Nibley was right about much, I vowed at age twenty-four to live a life that was not spoiled by too much seeking for security. I wanted to study things out, discover a few new things, and report on them. I also wanted to enjoy the beauty and variety of the world and people as a foretaste of better things to come. I owe much to hearing Nibley.

CHARLES RANDALL PAUL  
Highland, Utah

## IN MEMORIAM

# FUNERAL TRIBUTES



*The following are excerpts from remarks given at Hugh's funeral, held in the Provo Tabernacle, 2 March 2005.*

ZINA NIBLEY PETERSEN (Daughter)

I N graduate school, I had a friend tell me, "We Christians all believe in life after this life, but you Mormons are the only ones I know packing for the trip." Daddy had a very well-packed bag. Having spent his life so deeply entrenched in the Western world of effort and accomplishment, having worked and worked for so many years, he spent his last two or so unlearning to work, or learning to unwork, learning the far more Eastern mysteries of *being* instead of *doing*, of effortlessness and nonresistance, of receiving his own helplessness with a grace and a patience that I had never seen in him when I was growing up. It was strange these last months to think that this smiling, peaceful, non-fidgeting little man with the calm, pleasantly resigned expression, was the same guy who had been so driven when I was a kid.

REBECCA NIBLEY (Daughter)

I T was a beautiful spring day, not unlike this one, the spring of 1987. I was receiving a master's degree from BYU. . . . When I told my dad I was on my way up to commencement, he said, "Well, let me grab my hat," and off he went with me. I said, "Dad, are you sure you want to come sit through this? It's going to be long; it's going to be boring." And he said, "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

So we went up together, and indeed it was long and tedious. Afterwards, we went out on the lawn where I was mingling with friends and people were taking pictures with family and friends. I had brought a little in-

stamatic camera and was going to ask some of my friends to take my picture. My dad grabbed it out of my hands and said, "Let me take your picture." I was a little taken aback—not that he wanted to take my picture because I was still kind of cute in those days, but because I was, after all, "clothed in the robes of the false priesthood." But he was actually very eager to take my picture. He took many shots, and I tried my best to look intellectual, and scholarly, and sexy at the same time (excuse me, general authorities). And we had quite a bonding experience between father and daughter. I'll never forget; it was wonderful. Well, afterwards I had to get back to California, so I went home and changed my clothes and dashed off to the Photomat to get my film developed. That was when I first discovered that he had forgotten to take the lens cap off the camera. So I have no pictures of that special occasion, but I have memories—and oh what memories!

ALEX NIBLEY (Son)

I KNOW many of you are here today to mourn the passing of a great intellectual. I am not. Because to me, Hugh Nibley, my father, was not primarily a man of intellect. Humility is knowing the limits of one's own ego, and Dad knew his. I was talking to him once about his grandfather, who had achieved great wealth and held high positions in the church and must have had a great drive to succeed. But Dad couldn't identify with that. "Ambition was never my weakness," he told me, "it was vanity."

He was well aware of his own vanity and fought it constantly. The rumpled hat and baggy pants were his own version of the monk's cassock, not a sign that he didn't care but that he knew the danger of caring too much.

He died slowly, but the best of him died last. Hugh Nibley, the writer, died several months ago when his hands could no longer type or hold a pencil more than a few minutes. Hugh Nibley, the speaker, died when his voice became too weak to speak above a whisper. And his ego—that vanity he fought so long—finally died when frailty left him completely dependent on others for every function of life.

And what was left? Pure love.

MICHAEL NIBLEY (Son)

WHEN I was in college, in an attempt to keep up family tradition, I took some courses in Latin, ancient Greek, and Old English. One result of this was that, over the last twenty years as I've made my home on the East Coast, my father and I have communicated (in Christmas and birthday cards) largely in the form of quotations from various classics of world literature. A few years ago, I suppose he was feeling the effects of aging, and he sent me a rather gloomy quotation from Homer (in the original Greek, of course) about growing old. I considered how to reply to this, and the answer came clear as a bell, not something in Greek or Latin but in the English of the poet Geoffrey Chaucer. In Chaucer's immortal *Canterbury Tales*, a character called the Wife of Bath tells the story of her life, and at the end of it, looking back, she says this:

But, Lord Christ! When that it  
remembreth me  
Upon my youth, and on my jollity,  
It tickleth me clear down to my  
heart's root.  
Unto this day it does my heart  
such good  
[To know] that I have had my  
world in my time.

I thought then, and I think even more today, that of few human beings could it be more truly said than of Hugh Nibley, my father, that he had his world in his time. And not just that he had his world, but that he had so much of it. His life was long; his life was productive. He spent his time doing what he loved to do, and he was at the center of a loving community of family and friends.

THOMAS NIBLEY (Son)

WE have met here today to honor Hugh Nibley. If we would do him true honor, we would look past him to Him whom he honored. And we would take it into our hearts and into our minds to bear testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ.

CHRISTINA NIBLEY MINCEK  
(Daughter)

**I**n our family, as soon as the children were old enough to walk, we began to be taken on outings into the Utah wilderness. Dad loved to be outdoors, and on most of his explorations of mountains and deserts, he took two or three, sometimes four, of the children along with him.

When I was three or four years old, I got to go along as his sole traveling companion on an overnight trip to Capitol Reef National Monument. It was an adventure for me, and I always felt safe with my storytelling daddy. But although I don't remember the entire trip, I do remember waking up in my sleeping bag at the base of a huge, bowl-shaped sandstone valley and being very frightened when I looked at the sleeping bag next to me and found it empty. My father wasn't there. But as I scrambled out of my own bag, before I had a chance to cry out, Dad came barreling down a steep, sandstone slope behind me and swooped me up over his shoulders to take me back up with him to see the view below.

Years later I came across a black and white photograph of a magnificent desert scene with a natural arch sloping into a smooth desert floor and the horizon in the background. There was a tiny dot in the middle of that desert floor. On the back of the photo, Dad had written the date, and under it, the words, "Christina at Capitol Reef."

I was the dot in the middle of the desert. My father had left me sleeping there so he could try to capture the beauty of the scenery and get a picture of his four-year-old at the same time.

This was an early lesson for me on how he put the universe in context. The fact that his child was an unrecognizable speck in the midst of all that splendid nature did not diminish my importance to him. To Dad, the fact that I was a part of it—that he was and we all are a part of it—demonstrated the perfect balance of nature, mankind, and the divine.

PAUL NIBLEY (Son)

**M**Y tribute and final gift to my father is the coffin in which he now lies (see photo, page 20). My gift to him is symbolic of the many gifts that he gave me through his personality and example. He taught me that



symbols, while containing no magic in themselves, are a powerful way to communicate when words are not effective. The symbols in the coffin are very personal to me and together express my feelings for my father and our relationship in a way that I cannot express in words.

When Hugh was a teenager, he worked in his grandfather's lumber company in the forests of northern California. He loved the forest and spent much of his life wandering the mountains to enjoy the beauty of nature. He often took me with him. The primary woods in the coffin are Douglas fir, redwood, and pine—the trees he cut down as a teenager and then defended as an environmentalist.

Though the forest was his first love, he loved the desert also, and spent a lot of time wandering in the national parks and monuments of Utah. The design of the coffin is inspired by a desert culture which he loved. The shape and decoration are borrowed from a linen chest found in an Egyptian tomb. The construction and joinery were invented in Egypt and, remembering his Jewish heritage in which metals are forbidden in the grave, do not depend on metal fastenings.

The secondary woods are tropical. The dark brown rings that support the carry poles are shedua, a tree that grows on the edge of the Sahara desert. The red molding under the cornice is purple heart, from Central America, and recalls his war experiences and his strong anti-war feelings, which run like a thin red line through all his writings and talks. These exotic woods reflect the exotic qualities in a man who tried hard to be the common man but in ways that made him all the more rare and precious.

JOHN WELCH (Friend)

**I**HAVE laughed and wept as I have prepared this final exam. . . . Speaking in behalf of all of you who have ever taken a Nibley class, attended a Nibley fireside, checked a Nibley footnote, or have been changed by reading his gifted prose, I simply say, "Thank you Hugh," with a special mention to Phyllis. If we were to render all the thanks and praise that our souls have power to possess, yet would our thanks be inadequate. Hugh was a true friend to many, a model mentor. He was generous and inspirational in the extreme. To paraphrase Brigham Young, I feel like shouting hallelujah when I think that I was so fortunate to ever know Hugh Nibley.

FIRST PRESIDENCY LETTER  
TO PHYLLIS NIBLEY  
(Read by Elder Jeffrey Holland)

**T**HE Lord has said, "Thou shalt live together in love, insomuch that thou shalt weep for the loss of them that die. Those that die in me shall not taste of death, for it shall be sweet unto them" (D&C 42:46). Such has been the experience of your husband as he returned home to a loving Heavenly Father. There he is happily united with loved ones



PHOTO COURTESY, PAUL NIBLEY

COFFIN BUILT BY PAUL NIBLEY USING WOODS AND CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES THAT SYMBOLIZE ASPECTS OF HIS FATHER'S LIFE

who preceded him in death and will await the opportunity to once again be with you and others left behind. Although there is no substitute for the love of a dear husband, we pray you will be blessed with peace and comfort at this tender time of parting and in the years ahead. With love and kind regards, Gordon B. Hinckley, Thomas S. Monson, James E. Faust

ELDER DALLIN H. OAKS (LDS Apostle)

I'VE known Hugh Nibley for more than fifty years. He was my teacher at BYU in the winter of 1954. I can't remember why I took his "Rise of the Western Church to 600 A.D.," but its impact on my intellectual horizons was enormous.

Professor Nibley was the first eccentric that I ever met. His example gave me a life-long appreciation for the wonderfully diverse way our Creator distributed talents and spiritual gifts. As I experienced his incredible brilliance and knowledge, I also observed his



humble indifference to appearance and other worldly things. He sometimes came to class with trousers and coat that did not match, and he often wore the two-buckle combat boots that were standard issue to the foot soldiers of World War II, then recently concluded. As I came to know him better in later years, I realized that he was the epitome of the Book of Mormon teaching, "Do not spend money for that which is of no worth, nor labor for that which cannot satisfy" (2 Nephi 9:51).

As I experienced it, the manner of his speaking was short bursts of unfinished fragments, as if he were always hurrying on to the next step, always in search of something more important than the present. He dealt with the present, but his principal concerns were always with what was timeless. Now he has broken the barrier of time; he has hurried on ahead. Now he has experienced some of the things he always sought. For those of us who still consider ourselves his students, he is still leading the way.