



All Theses and Dissertations

1996

The Brigham Young University Folklore of Hugh Winder Nibley: Gifted Scholar, Eccentric Professor and Latter-Day Saint Spiritual Guide

Jane D. Brady

Brigham Young University - Provo

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



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

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Brady, Jane D., "The Brigham Young University Folklore of Hugh Winder Nibley: Gifted Scholar, Eccentric Professor and Latter-Day Saint Spiritual Guide" (1996). *All Theses and Dissertations*. 4548.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/4548>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Brigham Young University Folklore of Hugh Winder Nibley:
Gifted Scholar, Eccentric Professor and Latter-day Saint Spiritual Guide

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

Brigham Young University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree


Master of Arts

by

Jane D. Brady

August 1996

This thesis by Jane D. Brady is accepted in its present form by the Department of English
of Brigham Young University as satisfying the thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts.


William A. Wilson, Committee Chair


Steven C. Walker, Committee Member


Richard H. Cracroft, Committee Member

Date

15 July 96


Jesse S. Crisler, Graduate Coordinator

Dedication

My initial thanks go to my husband Ken, who besides being a gourmet cook and far better housekeeper than I am, also gave me incredible support during my graduate degree by changing his work schedule to weekends so that I could go to school more freely. He is a great confidant and friend and I truly appreciate him.

I'm also grateful to my children. Sam: you're the best storyteller around and I'm so proud that you are my son. And McKenna: your "Monkey Hugs" help me through every single day.

Many thanks to Kathy Kidd for her inspiration to pursue this topic as my thesis and for her getting me to take folklore in the first place. Her friendship has been a treasure in my life.

I'm very grateful to William Wilson for being willing to chair my thesis even though he's a busy man. I'm privileged that I could study under someone whose ideas ring so true to me and whose writings I will be raiding for the rest of my life.

Of course I wouldn't have even entered graduate school if it weren't for Steve Walker, so thanks seem hardly sufficient. It's comforting to me to know that such an ideal professor and person exists as Steve Walker is. His guidance and support in many aspects of my life have been life-changing.

Thanks to Richard Cracroft who besides being a wonderful boss and master storyteller, made my thesis much stronger with his careful editing and suggestions. His joviality, genuine kindness and deep faithfulness is inspiring.

My heartfelt thanks to my sister and best friend Carol Corena Bayless who taught me to love literature at a young age by sharing with me the world of C. S. Lewis. Her support during the weeks before my thesis defense was invaluable, not to mention her moral support during the actual event. I will always appreciate her wise insights.

Though I'm sure Hugh Nibley would consider this whole thesis a complete waste of time, I feel it necessary to thank the man who has inspired so much lore. And, of course, thanks to all of my informants who keep his lore alive.

Table of Contents

Folklore and Hugh Nibley Contextualized	1
Folklore Defined	1
BYU Defined	1
Biographical Sketch	2
Veracity Issue	6
 Hugh Nibley as Hero	 9
Hero Defined	9
Breaker of Stereotypes	9
Communal Recreation	9
Foreordained	10
Youth	11
Ability with Languages	12
Intellectual Superman	15
James Bond	17
Like Unto Jesus	20
Always Learning	21
Memorization	23
Goes the Extra Mile	27
Aware of Reputation?	28
 Hugh Nibley as Non-Conformist and Iconoclast	 30
Engagement	30
Trickster Defined	32
Iconoclast Defined	33
Attacks Hypocritical Behavior	33
Takes Risks	35
Speaks Mind	36
Gets Away with Things	38
Pokes Fun at Academia	39
Unconcerned with Wealth	40
Non-reliance on Publication	42
Maintains a Mantic Perspective	44
Does What Seems Right to Him	46
 Hugh Nibley as Eccentric	 48
Eccentric Defined	48
Lecture Style	48
Teacher of the Year	51
Absent-minded Professors	52
Flawed Methodology	53
Eccentric Appearance	56
Completely Engrossed in Learning	58

Hugh Nibley as Latter-day Saint Spiritual Guide	59
Criteria to Become a Hero	59
Spiritually Sensitive	59
Temple Goer	60
Access to Unrevealed Information	60
Effective Missionary	61
Defender of the Faith	62
Powerful BYU Figure	63
Prophet	64
True to the Value Center of Mormons	65
In His Own World	66
Embodies LDS Ideals and Goals	67
 Hugh Nibley as Humble Defender of the Faith	 68
Not “Other”	68
Devoted to the Church	69
Attuned to Higher Law	69
Childlike Humility	71
Afraid to Finish Current Book	71
What He Would Do If Twenty-two Again	72
Remembered Most for His Spirituality	72
 Hugh Nibley as BYU Icon	 73
Represents BYU’s Divine and Unique Purpose	73
Bruce Hafen Using Nibley as Example	73
Humans Need Stories to Make Meaning of Lives	74
Legendary	74
 Works Cited	 75
 Appendix	 78
Richard H. Cracroft	79
Gary Dayton	82
G. Eugene England	85
Gary P. Gillum	87
Gary L. Hatch	90
Richard N. Holzapfel	93
Victor L. Ludlow	102
Daniel McKinley	104
Don E. Norton	108
Stephen E. Robinson	112
Samuel R. Rushforth	117
Steven C. Walker	118
John W. Welch	119
William A. Wilson	128

Chapter One

Folklore and Hugh Nibley Contextualized

Folklore is “an artistic communication that occurs in face-to-face interactions among people with shared social identities.” Folklore occurs among all groups of people because stories are at the heart of human communication. As Neil Postman states, “Human beings require stories to give meaning to the facts of their existence. . . . A story provides a structure for our perceptions; only through stories do facts assume any meaning whatsoever” (122). Stories thus help us to form our identities both as individuals and as groups. Postman refers to nations needing stories just as people need them, to provide themselves with a sense of continuity and direction. The same could be said for other groups, such as university faculties and staffs, which share many common interests and experiences. The more a common value center exists within a group, the larger the base of shared stories, and the more likely those are to cohere around common themes. The stories told in university communities often focus on or collect and gather around one particular hero. As Richard Dorson states in *American Folklore*, “Every college or university in the land possesses some odd faculty member whose behavior makes legends” (255).

Brigham Young University, in Provo, Utah, is a community of approximately 28,000 students and 1,750 faculty and staff members. This tight-knit academic community is unique in its combination of high academic ideals and strict religious standards. BYU is unquestionably a religious institution, with the presiding members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints constituting the Board of Trustees. With this strong religious emphasis in conjunction with secular learning, it is not surprising

that the hero which the BYU community has chosen to revere through its stories is Professor Hugh W. Nibley, a man who has excelled in both scholarly and religious pursuits. Nibley's genius and devotion have combined with his eccentricity and absent-mindedness to create a man of legends.

The stories that the BYU community tell of Nibley are not unfounded. He is an intellectual giant as evidenced by his great academic accomplishments. After graduating summa cum laude in history from UCLA in 1934, Hugh Winder Nibley earned his doctorate degree from the University of California at Berkeley as a University Fellow in 1938. Fluent in over twenty languages, he has done specialized study in Coptic, Aramaic, and Egyptian. After teaching history and languages at Claremont College, Scripps College, Pomona College and U. C. Berkeley, all in California, he served in the war from September 1942 to November 1945. He came to teach at Brigham Young University, in Provo, Utah, in 1946, where he is currently professor emeritus of ancient scripture. At age eighty-six, 1996 is Nibley's first year not teaching religion classes but he continues to work on various projects relating to Egypt and ancient scriptures. He is currently finishing a book on the Hypoccepholus (meaning under-head), the object which ancient Egyptians believed brought back the spark of life to mummies.

Dr. Nibley has won several awards including Professor of the Year at BYU in 1972-73. He has also won the David O. McKay Humanities Award in 1971. In 1979 he received the Alumni Distinguished Service Award. In 1983 he was awarded Honorary Doctorate of Letters at BYU. He was awarded a Religious Education Service Award in 1995 and Exemplary Manhood Award in 1991. In 1995 his collected works were

awarded an LDS Literature Award. Nibley has also served as the Director of the Institute of Ancient Studies.

A prolific writer with over three hundred titles in his bibliography, Nibley has published in a number of technical journals including *Western Political Quarterly*, *Church History*, and *Encyclopedia Judaica*. He has also published in many Latter-day Saint journals and magazines including *The Improvement Era*, *Ensign*, *Sunstone* and *Dialogue*. His scholarly focus over the past decade has been comparative world ritual, but in all of his various scholarly foci over more than a half-century he has consistently proved that: “The verve of his mind and style demonstrates that history need not be wooden, that technical mastery need not be obscure, and that learned writing need not be stripped of all references to faith” (Nibley *Timely* dust jacket).

Ever since I started my education at BYU in 1985, I have heard stories about Hugh Nibley from my professors and fellow students. Even before I had read anything by him, let alone met him, I had formed a clear mental image of Nibley. I imagined him to be wildly intelligent, passionately committed to the LDS Church, and fearlessly bold in his scathing wit and actions. The first time I heard him speak was at a Clean Air Symposium at BYU in the summer of 1987. He lived up to his reputation delightfully. On that occasion Nibley rebuked Geneva Steel and Joe Cannon, its CEO, by quoting scriptures, rattling off statistics and spinning logic. I became intrigued with the man and have since read many of his books. My continuing interest in Hugh Nibley has been fueled by the stories which I continue to hear about him in my BYU classes, from fellow students and BYU alumni.

Over the past two years I have collected as many Nibley stories as I could from the faculty and staff of BYU. In listening to the stories and interviewing the tellers I have learned a great deal about Hugh Nibley, but even more about those who tell stories about him. Folklore reveals who we are and what is important to us by revealing even more about the person *telling* the story than about the subject of the story itself. Because people cannot remember every story they hear, the ones they remember are important to them, for whatever reason. Telling stories is important because stories can fulfill basic needs of the teller. In the case of the BYU Nibley stories, the needs of the teller seem to center in a desire to admire a hero, fill a need to fit in and belong to a group, a need to feel superior, a need to reinforce paradigms, a wish to instill others with values one believes in, a need for wish fulfillment, or a need to be entertained.

Folklorist William A. Wilson describes folklore in the larger Mormon community in a way that applies readily to the smaller BYU community: “Because Mormon folk narratives are cut close from the marrow of everyday experience and reflect the hopes, fears, joys, and anxieties of common church members, they bring us about as close as we are likely to get to Mormon hearts and minds” (Faith 4). Extrapolating from the broad range of Hugh Nibley stories, I will examine why people tell stories about him and how the stories function in their lives.

The Nibley stories fall into patterns and recurring themes. Five main themes emerge in the stories I have collected: Nibley as hero, Nibley as iconoclast, Nibley as eccentric, Nibley as Latter-day Saint spiritual guide, and Nibley as humble but vigorous defender of the faith. In nearly every story I have collected, Nibley is portrayed as an

intellectual superman and a Mormon hero for other Latter-day Saints to emulate. A significant number of stories also portray Nibley as an iconoclast who attacks cherished beliefs and traditions which many proclaim to be LDS beliefs. Most of his colleagues believe Nibley attacks unbending letter-of-the-law traditions but holds true to the spirit-of-the law. Nibley defenders assert that these beliefs need attacking because they are unnecessary customs which people follow blindly without realizing what they are doing.

In this role Nibley comes very near to playing the classic folklore “trickster,” and his bold actions in cutting to the quick of popularly held customs and beliefs are thrilling to watch, even though few would have the boldness to emulate them. Witness the daring in Nibley’s 1960s BYU commencement exercise prayer in which he said, “We have met here today clothed in the black robes of a false priesthood” (Leadership). Few people in the BYU community would have dared to utter such a statement, especially in a prayer, yet when Nibley did, many at BYU at once thrilled to such a bold statement and pondered the significance of his meaning.

Another facet of the trickster role which Nibley plays is the “eccentric professor” common to most every university. In such stories Nibley is brilliant, yet his socks don’t match, or he teaches a lecture from an open book while walking briskly across campus, with students on either side feverishly scribbling down notes. Nibley tends to be forgetful of such everyday concerns as whether his lawn is mowed or where his car is parked. He even gets so involved in his studies that he neglects emergencies like the time that a child of his was badly hurt and he kept insisting he would be there in a minute to help. Finally a doctor called him from the Emergency Room asking for permission to

treat his son's badly broken arm (Janice Cracroft "Broken Arm").

There are many stories about Nibley's spiritual knowledge. Some stories place him as unofficial prophet to the BYU community and the LDS Church at large. Because he has labored to gain information and knowledge which are unrevealed to many others, people look to him for knowledge and light, as one who exemplifies D&C 50:24, "He that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day." He is held up by many as a model LDS scholar and Saint.

In addition to these themes, there are some minor, less complimentary themes. Some stories make Nibley an apologist or defender of the faith, which some professors consider to be closed-minded. Others present him as a pampered scholar-icon who has freedom because no one checks up on him. Nibley is notorious as a sloppy footnoter, and many stories emphasize how little Nibley cares about such scholarly conventions.

The telling of these stories raises the question of their veracity. While Hugh's brother, Reid, light-heartedly says the stories about his brother are "mostly wild enough to be true" (Knight B-1), some people become concerned over whether an event actually happened or not. As Michael Owen Jones has argued, when a cycle of stories develops around a notable figure, actual events in the figure's life are, in the stories, likely to be sloughed off or added according to what the people recounting the narratives want their hero to be. In other words, the hero becomes a reflection of them. What has been added or subtracted will, therefore, tell us much of the narrators, as Wilson states in relation to another LDS folk-hero, J. Golden Kimball, legendary member of the First Quorum of the

Seventy in the LDS Church, whose occasional and inadvertent lapses into swearing during his sermons endeared him to rank-and-file Mormons throughout the Church:

We should remember [reminds Wilson] that the J. Golden Kimball stories are, in the final analysis, no longer about J. Golden Kimball at all. They are about us. We are the ones who keep them alive by continual retelling and by continual reshaping. We should be concerned, I believe, not so much with trying to characterize Kimball but rather with trying to understand ourselves--trying to understand why we have created the kind of character who lives in the legend, and trying to discover what need the telling of the stories fills in our lives. (Paradox 54)

It is seldom possible to verify where fact ends in folklore and embellishment begins. All of the stories included in my study appear to have some basis in fact. But even where stories directly contradict each other, they still reveal what Nibley means to the BYU community. The stories serve a function for those who tell them. Many of those I interviewed have had direct contact with Nibley and relate stories of events they actually witnessed or that they directly heard from Nibley. But whether the events really happened or not, the stories told from first-hand knowledge can be studied under the same microscope as those heard third- or fourth-hand. All stories, including personal narration, are socially based. Stories are told in response to group expectations and therefore are adapted in ways that make them reflect the group. So, first-hand or not, all stories may be examined with the same question in mind: what need does the telling of Hugh Nibley stories fulfill for the BYU community?

In the process of telling these Hugh Nibley stories again and again, as members of the BYU community pass them along to others, the narrators transform the stories, probably unconsciously, into truthful and accurate indicators of their own values, attitudes and needs. And this truthfulness may be more important, finally, than the factual accuracy of the stories--for we are inspired and moved to action not by what really happened but by what we believe happened. In this sense the stories are always true--true to the hearts, minds and souls of those we tell them.

Whether remembering our group or individual pasts, stories fill the functions of codifying acceptable behavior, releasing tension, illustrating an important point, mitigating the harshness of life, and providing a unifying link among people in a community. Stories falling under these different categories will meet different needs for the different people who are telling them. Stories are crucial to understand who we are. I echo Wilson's citing of Linda Degh--folklore is "'a sensitive and immediate indicator' of what we feel most deeply" (Faith 13). By studying the BYU stories of Hugh Nibley, we can better understand how deeply the BYU community of scholar-saints feel about their faith and their roles as LDS scholars.

Chapter Two

Hugh Nibley as a Hero

Hugh Nibley fits all the standard definitions of a folk-hero. As Roger Abrahams states, “A hero is a man whose deeds epitomize the . . . attributes most highly valued within . . . a society” (341). Abrahams goes on to say that “heroism is the attainment of public acclaim by specific figures whose actions are seen as noteworthy and good, and, in most cases, worthy of emulation” (341). At an institution of higher learning like BYU it is natural that the community admire Hugh Nibley’s heroic brilliance and scholarship.

Nibley breaks academic and religious stereotypes at BYU. Nibley himself has said, “To quote one of the greatest [LDS] leaders, the founder of this institution [Brigham Young]: ‘There’s too much of sameness among our people. I do not like stereotyped Mormons--away with stereotyped Mormons!--Goodbye all!’” (Leadership). This breaking of stereotypes is the main focus of BYU professors’ Nibley stories, the attribute for which they seem to admire him most. Reaching farther and higher intellectually, he transcends the routine and therefore acts as a community hero.

When professors tell these heroic stories about Nibley in class, or to other friends and professors, the stories become folklore, as the listeners aid in the communal re-creation. As William A. Wilson states,

An item of Mormon folklore, to have become folklore, must have moved from the individual expression of its originator to the communal expression of those who preserve it, losing, through the process of communal re-creation, . . . the marks of individual invention and assuming in time a form that reflects the consensus of the group. (“Paradox” 45)

These communal Nibley stories reflect a vision of what these professors would like to be but, because of either intellectual limitations, worldly concerns, or lack of courage, cannot be.

The stories surrounding Nibley's heroism date back to before his birth. Mormons tend to prick up their ears when they hear that someone may have been "foreordained" to a certain calling--that they were chosen before time to fulfill a certain role. Mormons believe that this type of foreordination occurs in extraordinary circumstances, and that when such an amazing child is to be born, often the mother is informed. In the Bible every time an angel appears to a woman it is to announce the birth of an important child.

When Hugh Nibley's mother was pregnant with him, she received a blessing from a General Authority of the Church in which she was told she would bear a son who was a choice servant or "chosen vessel" (depending on who is telling the story) of the Lord and that he would render great service to the Church. She was told to give him everything that he wanted because those things that he desired would help him in his service to the Church (Jones 19). His mother apparently took this blessing very seriously, for Nibley had his own private library by the time he was eight (Reyna 19). As Richard Holzapfel adds, "As a result [of his special calling], he didn't even have to do dishes. He had tutors; he was educated; he was taken care of" (Holzapfel "Baby Blessing").

An interesting twist on this legend is that Sister Nibley, Hugh's mother, received this blessing from John R. Winder, the first counselor to LDS President Joseph F. Smith, and Nibley subsequently was named Hugh Winder Nibley. Even before he took his first breath, then, Nibley was a legend in-the-making.

Another sure sign that Nibley would become a Latter-day Saint and BYU hero is the fact that he comes from a powerful lineage. Charles W. Nibley, Hugh's grandfather, served in the First Presidency of the Church; in some stories Hugh would be visiting him at the Hotel Utah in Salt Lake City.

Stories about Nibley's youth are as rare as those in the New Testament about Jesus's growing up. But there is the classic account of his crawling around on the rug in his home and being fascinated by the Arabic script on it (Holzapfel, Knight). Perhaps the fact that *The Salt Lake Tribune* published a cartoon of this has perpetuated this story. There are also stories about his getting a French tutor when he was five, and others of his teaching himself Greek at age ten (Knight B-12).

Nibley was born in Portland, Oregon, and grew up in Los Angeles, California. "He displayed precocity at an early age, being so far ahead of other students in his elementary school class that the principal took on the responsibility of giving him special tutoring" (Irvine 7). He was not *always* the ideal student, however, and received many demerits for being lost in his own thoughts to the point of not paying attention to what the teacher was saying. While sometimes he would apparently wander away from class (Irvine 7), he was there enough to gain lasting insights. In high school Nibley belonged to the Shakespeare group, where the members would recite lines from the Bard until one of them made a mistake; consequently, says John Welch, "Nibley still to this day will weave Shakespearean phrases into his talks and articles" (Welch "Shakespeare Group").

Hugh Nibley's family was wealthy and socially prestigious. At an early age he learned how to act interact with the impressive house guests his parents would entertain.

But his parents always gave top priority to Hugh's studies. If he were up in his room reading a book and didn't want to come down to dinner, one of the servants would bring him dinner to his room on silver platters. Notes Welch, "He grew up literally with a silver spoon in his mouth" (Welch "Nibley's Youth").

Obviously Hugh Nibley (and his four musically gifted brothers and one sister) received from his parents tremendous personal support and academic encouragement. Hugh has admitted, "Our mother pushed her kids" (Maynes 1). The Nibleys grew up in a predominantly Jewish area in Glendale, California, and Hugh's mother apparently wanted her children to do better than the Jewish children in the neighborhood, many of whom were, like Hugh, over-achievers. Despite his tremendous achievements, however, Nibley never quite lived up to his mother's expectations. She had hoped that he would write a best-selling novel. Smiling at his human perversity, Nibley says, "Her wanting me to do it, of course, made it an achievement for which I had no desire" (Maynes 1). In fact, this stubborn streak is one of Nibley's most respected characteristics. Even if he shunned the direct path that his mother had charted for him, he excelled under her motivating influence.

A youth with a voracious appetite for learning, Nibley embarked freely on his quest for knowledge. He recalls:

I began my second decade in Southern California as a compulsive reader, memorizing Shakespeare plays and aspiring to add something to the Bard's modest contribution. But English literature I soon found to be derivative, and so took to Old English to find what was behind it; what

was behind it was Latin, and what was behind that was Greek.

(“Intellectual Autobiography” xx)

Many professors are amazed by Nibley’s language ability. Gary Hatch tells stories of his learning Arabic simply by getting a job driving around kids who spoke Arabic and learning it by listening to them (“Learning Arabic”). Hatch says,

I’ve always admired his ability to learn foreign languages. He can speak very well and read languages that no one else can. Zina [Nibley’s daughter] told me he probably reads upwards of about thirty languages-- some of which no one reads anymore, like Coptic. And that he reads and speaks, or at least understands, every European language.

(“Memorization”)

As a graduate student, Nibley was mistakenly engaged to teach a Russian course; he learned the language in order to be able to teach it and was disappointed when the error was discovered and he was not permitted to teach Russian (Hatch “Russian Class”). When asked how many languages he actually knows, Nibley once responded, “That’s like asking a musician how many songs he can play on the piano” (Knight B-12).

His skill with language is rare and remarkable. As Richard H. Cracroft relates,

He gave the first faculty lecture at the university back in the mid-sixties, maybe 1964 or 1965. He gave it in the Smith Family Living Center and he kind of wandered onto the stage after the introduction and there were maybe two, three hundred of us there and he got up and spoke--it wasn’t a prepared lecture; it was Hugh Nibley. And he just started talking and then

he said, “Oh you can’t understand this unless you understand the Greek.”

And then he wrote the sentence on the blackboard in Greek. And then he said, “Of course this works even better in Latin.” Then he went into Sanskrit. And he was just mumbling to himself about discoveries, and then would look up and say “See!” And he’d get excited about the point and would point to this scribble on the board, and you could tell he was off in an *exciting* adventure. But we could only sense the excitement and could not understand the content. Everybody began to give that amused “Does anybody understand him?” look at each other-- that laugh in that undertoned voice. We were not laughing at Hugh Nibley; we were laughing at his eccentricity and his enthusiasm, and we were appreciative, but we certainly were not *enlightened*. All we were enlightened by was, “Well we don’t know what he’s saying but we have faith it must be right, and this somehow must demonstrate the gospel, and aren’t we grateful that Hugh is demonstrating that the gospel is true, even though we haven’t got the slightest idea what he is saying?” And that was a bunch of educated men and women who were simply swept up in admiration of the *manner* of the man rather than anything he was saying in terms of *content*. (“It’s Greek to Me”)

The impression Nibley’s professor/colleagues tend to give about Nibley’s intellect is that he is so out of their realm that his abilities are difficult to comprehend. All they can do is sit back and admire. Interestingly, it is professors from the English Department who tend

to emphasize stories about Nibley's ability with languages.

Nibley is a hero because he is an intellectual superman. His intelligence is probably his single most talked about attribute and the source of many stories. He is so brilliant, in fact, that as Wilson says, "When he took his Ph.D. exams they [the professors reviewing him] were all worried about who would examine him because they were afraid that he would show them up" ("Ph.D. Exams"). When I asked Wilson why he tells this story to others he responded, "For me it just highlights the point that he is a very intelligent, capable person. So intelligent and capable that the professors were afraid to examine him for fear that he would show *them* up."

There are several stories circulating about Nibley and his various dissertations. Apparently the first one he wrote was all mapped out on his famous 3x5 note cards-- Nibley being a practical man used rejected catalog cards from the library; even in the 1930s Hugh Nibley was recycling. The cards were packed in shoe boxes that Nibley took with him everywhere. One day when he was in the grocery store, his shopping cart tipped over. All of his note cards spewed out and were sprawled out all over the floor. He had been wrestling with his dissertation topic, trying to get something going with it. When he saw all of his note cards lying there on the floor he said, "I didn't like that subject very much anyway," and left the cards on the floor of the store (Welch "Dissertation"). Most scholars wouldn't dream of starting from scratch after putting so much work into a dissertation. For Nibley there was no point in continuing if the subject was not interesting to him and if he wasn't getting anywhere in the writing.

Another heroic aspect of Nibley's intellect is the speed with which his mind

works. One story which Don Norton tells illustrates this perfectly:

There's the story that at Berkeley he wrote a dissertation and the committee rejected it because they said the subject was irrelevant. The subject was student riots in the ancient world. This was in 1934 at Berkeley. He went back and in a month wrote another dissertation. He holed himself up in a part of the store. He says he ate moldy carrots and drank condensed milk for a month and wrote it. ("Dissertation in a Month")

Writing a dissertation in a month is nearly impossible to comprehend, but this story also illustrates how much ahead of his reviewers Nibley was by writing about the subject of riots, at Berkeley of all places. He seems to have a way of sensing what the important issues are even before history endorses his views on the subject.

Nibley's mind is almost like a computer. Before the age of Infobases or WordCruncher or any type of computer program which could track all of the references on a particular topic, Nibley's mind could do it on its own. John Welch sometimes asks Nibley what he knows about a particular word or phrase, for instance *priestcraft*. Nibley thinks about it for ten minutes or so and then he spouts out all that he knows.

It was like the computer had just been searching all through his mind and then out came one reference after another. He hadn't gone to an index and looked it up. But he talked about all of the contexts in which the word appears. I don't know how his mind is wired but it has the ability to associate things. (Welch "Computer-like Ability")

So Nibley, the man of brilliance, destined to be so before he was born, was given everything he needed in order to enhance his intellect.

Even more heroic than the academic stories are those revolving around his James Bond-like prowess in World War Two. Nibley says that he ended up in the Army by volunteering for everything. You volunteer, they'll take you. Only suckers volunteer, but I just kept volunteering until I ended up in the worst position of all--Headquarters Company in the 101st Airborne Division, first to land in France. (Bell 34).

Nibley was an intelligence officer in the war and he crammed every pocket in his clothing with classified information. If he got shot, his superiors needed to be able to find the top secret information which he was carrying. Smuggled into one of those pockets, however, was a copy of The Book of Mormon--Nibley felt strongly enough about carrying it with him that he carried it wherever he went (Welch "Intelligence Officer").

Nibley appears larger than life in stories where he memorizes top secret information and destroys the documents in order to get through a checkpoint without having the papers discovered, only to return to London to repeat word for word what the documents contained (Hatch "Intelligence Officer"). There is even a war story about the heroic Nibley sneaking behind enemy lines and killing a man with a piano wire (Reyna 25).

Nibley spent most of his military service in Germany, where he had served an LDS mission as a young man, thus learning before the war to speak fluent German. There is an interesting story about Nibley going back to one of the areas which he had

tracted on his mission. One house had been particularly unreceptive to the gospel and he and his companion had cursed the place upon leaving. Nibley says, “Sure enough, when we came back the house was completely burned and all that was left was the stone doorway” (Welch “War Stories”). The universalizing hero elements here are clear. This same type of story is a very popular LDS missionary folklore story. In one variation, the missionaries take their laundry to a Laundromat where the owner hangs up their temple garments in the window for all to see. The missionaries curse the place and the next time they return, the Laundromat is burned to the ground (Human 23-24). This cyclical-type story has re-attached itself to the Mormon hero Hugh Nibley. But the message is the same: Nibley is a man of God who has power that is not to be trifled with.

In another war story Nibley is rifling through an officer’s desk deep in the enemy camp when someone enters the room. “Thinking fast, Nibley pretended to be the janitor, and was not suspected of being a spy” (Zmolek 9). In another variation he is caught with his hand in the desk but simply says, “I’ve got what I came for,” in fluent German; the officer “just stood there and didn’t know whether or not to say anything until it was too late” (Madsen 9). It is said that Nibley spoke German and many of its dialects so fluently that he could parachute behind enemy lines and “adopt the dialects and intonations of wherever he was, and was never suspected of being a foreigner” (Zmolek 10).

It is also told that Nibley had visions of many of the battles which took place, before they happened. These visions were referred to as Hugh’s “Five a.m.ers,” for the visions would awaken him at five a.m. In these visions he saw everything from a sunken *U.S.S. Arizona* to the Battle of the Bulge. In one story Nibley had been telling his

superiors that there was going to be a counter-attack; nobody believed him. Then when the German armies came rushing through, his commander yelled, “Get Hugh Nibley up here!” *Then* they took him seriously. They believed he had received advance warning (Holzapfel “Battle of the Bulge”).

A favorite war story is told by Truman Madsen: landing with the Allied Forces at Normandy, Nibley was driving through the water in a specially adapted army jeep. Apparently Nibley had been pondering the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and while driving through the water up onto the beach this thought struck him, “It is ridiculous that the Book of Mormon should mention elephants. Oh, but it only mentions them in the Book of Ether, which is 2,000 years B.C. GREAT SCOTT, maybe the Book of Mormon is true after all” (Madsen 15). As Madsen adds, “That is the kind of thought only Nibley would have going in on an invasion.”

All these war stories take place against a backdrop of constant reading, studying and feeding his mind. Every European bookstore that he found, he would enter. As Truman Madsen has put it to his colleague John Welch, “No more could he walk by a bookstore than an alcoholic could walk by a saloon” (Welch “Compulsive Reader”). The books which he purchased abroad formed the basis for many of his early articles.

It is important to remember that whether or not these stories are true, people in the BYU community tell them over and over and like to *believe* that they are true. These stories contribute to the legendary status of their hero, Hugh Nibley. And in telling and retelling these Nibley stories, BYU professors reveal their attitudes, values, and concerns (“Paradox” 42-43). Because, at a university, two of the most commonly held values are

intelligence and hard work. We may deduce, then, that those professors who tell these stories give high priority to both values and revere Hugh Nibley as a hero who embodies both.

In keeping with Nibley's legendary status, there is a story about him which puts him in the same class as Jesus himself. Just as the young Jesus went to the temple and amazed all of his elders with his knowledge and wisdom (Luke 2:46-47), so there is a story about Nibley having a similar experience attending his first academic conference. The relatively young Nibley showed up wearing his fishing hat and cockily lurched into the presentation of his paper. Many in his audience were shocked by his unscholarly behavior. As he spoke he would go off on tangents when he got a new idea and then eventually return to his original paper. He quoted huge manuscripts from memory including passages in foreign languages. In the story, the chairman of the Harvard Divinity School leaned over to a colleague and said, "I don't like him. People who know that much make me nervous" (Madsen 10). As the conference progressed, everyone began to look to Nibley whenever a question came up, and all deferred to the answers he gave because he cited sources they had never read. He would say to them, "After you have read such and such you will understand this" (10). Even as a budding professor, Nibley was respected as an authority.

Closely related to such professional heroism is Nibley's prodigious capacity for learning and his unquenchable thirst for knowledge. There are stories about his being locked in the library on a Saturday night and not even realizing it, and coming out on Monday just in time to meet his classes (Reyna 8). Some stories even suggest that, as an

undergraduate, he would hide in the bathroom on purpose when the janitor was locking up (Zmolek 8). In other stories he falls asleep in one of the bathroom stalls in the library and stays there until the janitor finds him (McKinley). Or there is the time he was the only one left in the library late at night and the janitor asked him to help fix a leaky pipe in the basement. Nibley was to hold a flashlight but soon the janitor could not see at all. Nibley had forgotten he was helping and had focused the flashlight on the book he had brought down with him (Robinson "Flashlight in the Library").

Nibley is also notorious for being very quiet whenever someone knocks on his office door so that he will not have to answer any questions and be disturbed in his work (Robinson "Hiding in Office"). He would much rather continue feeding his mind than having to suffer idle conversation.

Illustrating how learning takes priority with Nibley, even above comfort, Kent Brown tells this story: "Nibley went to Chicago for a semester, and a different teacher was put in his office. This teacher had all the broken chairs removed and new ones put in. When Nibley returned, he asked why this had been done and he was told that the old ones had been uncomfortable to sit on. 'But that's the point!' he wailed" (Zmolek 16).

Nibley is said to know extremely well more than twenty languages. There are jokes as to *how well* he knows languages. Mark Riddle, on the one hand, tells a story of Nibley seeing a bunch of international students in the library and saying hello to them in fifteen different languages (Reyna 18). On the other hand, Dan McKinley tells a story of Nibley's stake president calling him out of the audience to speak, without warning. After Nibley sat down the stake president said, "He's the only one I know who can call you a

dirty name in fourteen different languages” (McKinley “Dirty Name”).

Nibley has the ability to read “dead” languages (i.e., Egyptian, Sumerian and Sanskrit) that few others can. Because of this ability, it is said that he can read “closed” books. This ability to delve into “closed books” is often the teaser. The storyteller then explains how Nibley once visited a small Indian tribe in Arizona, who believed, according to their legend, that their God would return one day and read to them from a book that no one else in the tribe was able to read. When Nibley was able to read the book, a book closed to others, the tribes people became angry. They did not believe that Nibley was their God, so his ability was contrary to their legend. It is said that Nibley is forbidden to return to their village (Sondra Jones 11, 35).

Many professors express the belief that the ability to learn many different languages is a sure sign of a great scholar. “He can sit down for a couple of hours and get the basic feeling about a language. He can learn a language [well] in half a semester. Language is very exciting because it gets you to the original thought of the author, not what the translators think of the original thought. [Nibley] uses all original sources” (Gillum “Language”).

Charmingly, Nibley does not seem to consider his extraordinary language ability as extraordinary. One funny anecdote depicts someone asking Brother Nibley if he thought “they should give college credit for Greek. His reply was, ‘Heck no! Why should you give college credit for something you learn at your mother’s knee?!’” (Zmolek 13). Obviously, Nibley must realize how ridiculous this sounds; it is refreshing that he does not seem to take himself too seriously.

There are stories which offer explanations as to how Nibley is able to memorize languages so proficiently. In his rhetoric class, Gary Hatch teaches the students many different techniques to increase the strength of their memories. One that he tells is of the “flip card” method which Hatch learned in Denmark as a Mormon missionary. The system basically involves reviewing and reviewing an item systematically until it is retained in long-term memory. In Hatch’s mission the story was told that Nibley invented the “flip card” system and was able to remember vast amounts of data because he used it so faithfully. Of particular interest for the folklorist is that Hatch himself doubts the veracity of the story:

When it [the flip card method] was presented to us, one story circulating around the mission was that this system was invented by Hugh Nibley. I don’t know if it was or not but they tie it to him because of his phenomenal ability with language and with memory. As “Wow, this is the system Hugh used to learn all those languages.” But then you do see him with flip cards so maybe that’s where it comes from, too, because when he’s going across campus or almost every time I’ve seen him he’s carrying those cards. And I’ve often wondered if he is reviewing things using this system that he supposedly invented. (“Flip Card Method”)

Whether or not Nibley invented the exact system which the Danish missionaries used, he in fact uses 3x5 cards as aids to memorization. In 1984 it was estimated that he had sixty-five shoe boxes in his office with 1,500 references in each box (Irvine 5). And Nibley said that he had just as many of these cards at home. He hates to throw any of his

cards away, though they are only for his own use. He says, “I’ve written the notes in different languages and thrown in a little shorthand once in a while” (Irvine 5).

Nibley enhances his memory and his intelligence by always learning, and his life is a never-ending search for more knowledge. One of the most famous claims about Nibley is that he used to have a book propped up on the steering wheel when he drove (Hatch “Reading and Driving”). In a 1990 *BYU Today* article Nibley verifies this story. “Oh, I used to drive out to UCLA sixteen miles a day, and I had a Model T Ford, which cost me \$15. And I would always have a textbook on the steering wheel” (Bell 39). The point is that no second is lost for learning, not even when he is driving, or walking across campus. As Steven C. Walker remembers, “He doesn’t do it now, but when I first knew him he was always reading as he walked across campus. I very often saw him with an open book. You never saw him trip or fall down. But I liked that, read as you go, I do that in the car myself. He can’t get enough of the learning” (“Always Reading”). There is also a story of Nibley nearly walking into a set of sprinklers simply because, with his head buried in a book, he was not watching where he was going (McKinley “Sprinklers”). In keeping with this “learn wherever you are” mentality, Nibley also confesses to brainstorming while he swims. “I stay afloat and think of things. I solve problems in the pool” (Irvine 5).

Professors are also impressed that he learns from whatever source he comes upon. Walker even observed him reading a Classic Comic Book--during a priesthood meeting. While some might be critical of Nibley on two accounts here, Walker reveals his own open attitude when he states, “It said to me that he would learn from whatever source he

could, *even* in High Priest's group meeting, *even* from Classic Comics. I think the reason he has such breadth of knowledge is that he just keeps piling it in there" ("Classic Comics"). Folk narratives about Nibley reveal that he does not only read academic publications. There is a story about him standing in a bookstore reading and chortling over a Phyllis Diller joke book (Madsen 20).

Nibley even learns from his students. One of Don Norton's favorite Nibley stories is about the time he and Nibley were chatting and Nibley was excited about a Book of Mormon class he was teaching: "Oh, I have these Book of Mormon students. It's amazing what those young people come up with. One of my students wrote a paper and pointed out something in the Book of Mormon, and I had never seen it! Isn't that amazing!" ("Always Learning"). Nibley acknowledges that anybody and everyone is in a position to teach him.

In another example of Nibley's willingness to learn from any source, Victor Ludlow tells of doing some research for Hugh Nibley. In the pre-computer era, Nibley asked him to find in the library everything that he could about biblical Abraham. "You would think that Hugh Nibley, who has been here at BYU all these years, would know everything that is in the library, but he doesn't. He is so busy with his writing and teaching and what other responsibilities he had at that time, young children at home and all of that" (Ludlow "Abraham"). Ludlow respected that Nibley is always trying to learn everything he can about a subject. And his task was, and is, never done. Even though he might know more than anyone else on a particular subject, he still thrives on seeing what new things might have come into the library. And by having another person check

sources in the library, he makes sure that he has not left anything undiscovered. Ludlow also expressed his respect for Nibley's desire to see the larger perspective before drawing conclusions about minutia.

Nibley's great and refreshing respect for all his students is quite remarkable considering the fact that in most cases he knows so much more than they do and therefore might be justifiably impatient with them. Liliane Zmolek observed him lecturing and said, "never was there a hint of impatience at their [the students'] ignorant questions--only a general impatience that he couldn't [ever] read his lecture quickly enough to finish before the time was through" (3).

Nibley's focus on learning is so intense it leaves no time for other pursuits. "I used to occasionally go to a football game," Nibley has said. "I don't go anymore, however--I haven't enough time because I have too many important things left to do" (Maynes 7). This unwillingness to waste time is illustrated by the oft-told story of his walking out on KBYU. When Nibley arrived at KBYU to record a close-circuit television program, he was asked to wait. Nibley had arrived on time and expected things to be running on schedule. When he felt he had waited long enough, he got up and left and the segment never was recorded (Jones 23). John Welch mentioned that when Nibley knows he will be forced to wait, he often brings along his 3x5s, so no second will be wasted ("Note Cards").

Nibley's love for learning overflows to his children. Many stories describe how learned his children are. One anecdote claims that when his daughter was only three, she knew all the Latin names for animals; another relates that when one of his sons was

eleven he wrote an article on Solomon's temple for the *Improvement Era* (Reyna 22).

Richard Holzapfel tells a story about Nibley's youngest daughter Zina: On one of her first days of school the teacher asked everyone who could to write his or her name on a piece of paper. After the teacher collected all of the papers she asked which student had done some particular drawings on the piece of paper she held up. Zina raised her hand and said, "That's mine." When the teacher asked if she could write her name or not, Zina answered, "That's [my name in] Egyptian hieroglyphics." The teacher didn't believe her until she found out her last name was Nibley (Holzapfel "Egyptian Hieroglyphics").

Nibley is transcendent, going above and beyond the expected in both his learning and his teaching. In so doing he does things that many people would consider "going the extra mile." William A. Wilson illustrates this trait:

During the early 60s I was walking across the campus. And I saw him walking with a couple of students on each side. And as I observed at close range, he was lecturing to these students or disciples. At least they were people who hung onto his every word because these people were desperately taking notes on both sides as they walked across campus trying to get down what he had said. ("Note-takers")

This story illustrates many elements of the Nibley-as-hero myth. First of all, he makes good use of his time. Second, others try to learn from his immense knowledge. Finally, he goes beyond his job description in order to learn and teach whenever and wherever he can.

Someone who is willing to commit so much life and energy to learning has a deep-seated passion, even a compulsion to find things out and to get jobs done. “Once when [Nibley] was traveling on his mission, he got off the bus and he was throwing rocks at a sign and couldn’t hit it and would not get back on the bus until he hit it. He had this compulsion and passion in everything he did” (Norton “Rocks at Sign”). Certainly, Nibley has a compulsion and passion for learning, especially of the Gospel according to the Latter-day Saints. One time he said to a class, “One of the students came to me and asked me what was going to be on the exam. Hell, you’re in here to satisfy *your* curiosity, not *mine*” (Norton “Answers to Test”). It is interesting how he assumes that *everyone* shares his quest for knowledge. Norton surmises, “The main thing that motivates him is the excitement of satisfying his own curiosity. He just can’t stand not to know what the hell happened in history. It’s just a consuming passion with him” (“Answers to Test”).

It would be interesting to know if Nibley is aware of his own reputation as an intellectual giant. In one story Wilson gives the impression that he is, except that the story is apparently untrue:

Marshall Craig, former chair of the English Department, long-time English Department faculty member, had been in the library and had checked out dozens of books and was struggling out of the library with his arms full of these books trying to keep them balanced and as he left the library he passed Hugh Nibley coming in. And Hugh Nibley looked at him and said, “Huh. You look like Hugh Nibley.” (“Marshall Craig”)

Whether Nibley is aware of his reputation or not is irrelevant. What is interesting is how many stories reinforce his brilliance and his tenacious hard work. Whether the events actually happened or his name just got attached to a cyclical story, the BYU community gains from and is unified by its collective view of Hugh Nibley as an intellectual hero.

Chapter Three

Hugh Nibley as Non-Conformist and Iconoclast

Hugh Nibley is a leader, and he has defined what being a leader means to him:

“Leaders are movers and shakers, original, inventive, unpredictable, imaginative, full of surprises that discomfit the enemy in war and the main office in peace” (Irvine 6). And discomfit the office he does, with actions that some may even consider shocking. For, at very least, Nibley is a first-class non-conformist, or someone who refuses to act in accordance with established customs, attitudes or ideas.

For example, there is a huge cycle of stories about Nibley’s unconventional courtship of and engagement to his wife, the former Phyllis Draper. Some of these stories share common elements as the idea that Nibley, upon joining the BYU faculty in his mid-thirties (after completing several degrees, going on a mission and serving in the military), was *strongly* encouraged, either by school officials, the commissioner of the Church Education System (CES), the General Authorities, or the Prophet himself, to marry quickly. Whether marrying would enable him to set a good example for young students or was for his own well-being depends on the story. But at any rate,

his ambitious scholarly work hardly left time for dating . . . , [so] not wanting to waste his time on girl-watching, he [knelt] down one day in the closed stacks of the old Grant Library and fervently laid out his faith, asking the Lord to please arrange that the next woman who came through the door would be a suitable wife for him. . . . The next woman who entered was his best student, considerably his junior. And so the courtship

began, hardly breaking the stride of his scholarly endeavors. (Zmolek 2)
How totally non-traditional and how thoroughly appropriate for Hugh Nibley to find his wife in the library!

In some stories he went up into the hills of Southern Utah to fast and pray for a wife (Reyna 20). In still other stories, after being told that if he didn't marry soon he wouldn't be permitted to continue at BYU, he went in desperation

up Rock Canyon and sat on a rock overlooking the canyon, and he had been fasting and he began to pray and asked the Lord to help him find a wife, and then as he was sitting, there his wife walked up the canyon, just taking a walk. He figured that must be the one so he went down and introduced himself. (Robinson "Cliff Top Revelation")

Other stories have Phyllis Draper working in the ticket booth for theatrical events (Madsen 13), or as the secretary in the Joseph Smith Building (Zmolek 4), or as the woman who gave him his key at Heritage Halls (Brady). All of the stories have this in common: (1) Nibley was given a command and obeyed immediately, if not romantically--a clear demonstration of Nibley's faith in God or inspired leaders. (2) Nibley does not do things in the usual way--he is a non-conformist.

This story about courtship bothers some people. People seemingly repeat it because it is so startlingly untraditional. To some his courtship of Phyllis seems to threaten the traditional romance in courtship. To compound Nibley's eccentric courtship, one story relates that just after he and Phyllis picked out her engagement ring they ran into a colleague of Nibley. Hugh could not remember his fiancée's name so he simply

introduced her as “XYZ” (Knight B-12).

According to Nibley, all these stories are not far from the truth, though he evades recounting the exact story. “I was thirty-six years old” he says, “and told Elder Widstoe, a member of the LDS Council of the Twelve, that I would marry the first girl I met at BYU. Two weeks later, I was engaged to that first girl and in six weeks I was married. That’s why it’s called BYWoo, I guess” (Maynes 7).

Though his role as unconventional hero is strong, his role as iconoclast may be even stronger. Certainly his “breaker of idols and conventions” reputation certainly does not end with his courtship stories. In this sense he shares some qualities with the trickster of classic folklore. As popular folklorist Roger Abrahams explains:

In many groups there is a trickster hero who expends much of his energy in anti-social or anti-authoritarian activity. . . . He is a projection of desires generally thwarted by society. His celebrated deeds function as an approved steam-valve for the group; he is allowed to perform in this basically childish way so that the group may vicariously live his adventures without actually acting on his impulses. (341-42)

Nibley does not fit the trickster mold in every sense. In fact, many of the professors explained that his “childlike” behavior is often *more* correct, more adherent to a higher law, than even their own behavior. But because of social norms and a desire not to stand out, or because of reliance on material security and cultural acceptance, the professors do not have the courage to do the things that Nibley does. Through him they are afforded what Abrahams calls “wish fulfillment” (341), vicariously thrilling to his escapades

while still maintaining their safe haven of security. So through telling the stories, people can enjoy the excitement without suffering any consequences. Heros do for us what we can not do for ourselves.

It is important to remember that, as Michael Owens Jones asserts,

no culture [even BYU] is so rigid as to completely prohibit deviance from the accepted patterns . . . , for there is always in each group a discrepancy between the cultural ideal, expressed overtly in its rules and regulations, and the real as exhibited by the actual behavior of group members. (251)

Though Nibley may act atypically, no one at BYU expresses the slightest doubt as to his deep-seated faithfulness as a Christian and Latter-day Saint; he always acts in a way consistent with the spirit of the law.

As an iconoclast, or one who attacks cherished beliefs, Nibley does not tear down those doctrines at Mormonism's center, while he grows impatient with zealous and spiritless pursuit of the letter of the law. Instead he attacks widely held cultural beliefs which are often shown to be hypocritical. A classic example of this is the story that Richard H. Cracroft tells about Nibley and his daughter Martha. As Nibley's stake president, Cracroft learned of an incident that happened between Nibley and the local seminary teacher:

[The] seminary teacher, several weeks into the new year, came to Hugh's home and said, "We're very concerned that Martha has not been coming to seminary. She's registered for this course and she hasn't shown up for

the last several weeks.” And Hugh said, “Well I’m concerned too. I’m just terrified and shocked. I’ve told Martha not to take seminary courses. It is devastating to the spirit and to the testimony to take those kinds of courses. Now I’ve told her a dozen times to stay away from that kind of corrupting influence in the church. I’m just shocked to know that she has gone ahead and signed up for courses like that. You bet. I’ll talk with her.” (“Seminary”)

Cracroft said, “You can count on Hugh to come down on the opposite side of most any issue. And even in things so certain and so sacred as seminary, which everyone knows one must take -- it is authorized by the Lord and the brethren -- even there Hugh puts his finger on the weakness of the seminary teachers.” Often seminary teachers titillate with fringe topics to keep the students coming. But through telling this story Cracroft feels personal support for his own views and points out that Nibley “emphasized that for *him* the gospel is centered in the scriptures and not in the interpretations of men” (“Seminary”). While others have told this same story with different details, the idea is the same. Many might *like* to be so outspoken, cutting straight to the heart of what is truly important. But, according to the stories circulating about him, few are as bold as Nibley.

Another reported event illustrating Nibley’s boldness as an iconoclast occurred when he was being interviewed for a temple recommend. During the course of the interview, Cracroft asked Nibley if he would accept a calling on the high council:

[Nibley] said, “Oh that would be fun. Provided that you don’t just sit

around and talk about problems and sit around and talk about things that could be improved and changed and provided that you [don't] sit and waste my time that I could be using elsewhere to talk about the government of the church. I'm not interested in those kinds of things.

That's just a waste of my time. If you don't do that then I would be happy to be on the high council." ("High Council")

Having grown up in the Church, Nibley undoubtedly knew what went on in high councils (as evidenced by the fact that he spelled out *exactly* what happens), and he was unafraid to express his opinions on the subject in a light-hearted way.

As Norton puts it, "He says things that nobody else is quite able or willing to say" ("Stimulating and Outspoken"). Of course some think he goes too far. For instance, in the 1960s Margaret Pope (Bruce R. McConkie's sister) asked Nibley to write a skit honoring President Ernest L. Wilkinson. When the script was completed, it strongly satirized Wilkinson. Pope considered the humor too caustic and didn't want the skit to detract from the aura and dignity of the university or its president. She therefore asked Cracroft to help tone down the sarcasm a bit. Nibley and Cracroft worked together but still left it "pretty caustic. . . . [On the big evening,] Hugh Nibley was willing to get out and perform and be very, very funny and caustic. And we looked down in the first row-- at President Wilkinson; he ate it up. He enjoyed the whole thing. It was fun to see the caustic wit of Hugh Nibley at work here" ("Wilkinson Skit").

Thirty years later, it is difficult to determine how people generally felt about President Wilkinson. But any person in a leadership position is likely to be the subject of

satire, sarcasm and mockery. Unafraid to be the person doing the mocking, Nibley had no worries about tenure or other repercussions. Not beholden to any outside forces besides his commitment to God, he has always enjoyed a certain freedom at BYU. Others enjoy the oblique freedom of living vicariously through his bold actions. In taking jabs at the university president it appears that he represented the majority faculty and staff who admired and feared Wilkinson, who was, himself, a kind of eccentric trickster hero.

What professor would not occasionally prefer to get caught up on his or her personal reading during faculty meetings? According to a colleague, Nibley reportedly read *Reader's Digest* there (Reyna 40). "He [would] often stand and make a comment, then sit down and keep reading. [No one] can do anything about it because Nibley is such a prominent person" (40). Many of the professors expressed their feeling that Nibley is safe because he is so well respected. As Richard Holzapfel states about the famous "robes of the apostate priesthood" graduation prayer:

He has gotten to a position where he is so dedicated to the kingdom that the Brethren don't question him. And as a result that gives him the freedom to say things that if I said it, I'd be excommunicated. It's kind of like there is nobody alive who can basically say exactly what he feels about how the Church operates. I think we tell the story [about the graduation prayer] because we wish we could do it. And here's our spokesman who can do it. So we use Nibley to do our own agenda but under the protection, under the umbrella, under the safety [of], "Well,

Nibley said this.” I’m not saying it’s bogus that we’re sitting up here giving Margaret Thatcher a degree. But look what *Nibley* says. He calls it as it is. It’s really my feelings but I’m using *Nibley* as my voice.
(Holzapfel “Famous Graduation Prayer”)

As another professor puts it:

There aren’t very many college professors at a university who have several members of the Board of Trustees so firmly in his corner that he can’t be touched, and *Nibley*’s enjoyed that. Even if he did get out of line, it’s very difficult to bring him back. He has a tremendous latitude. He doesn’t take advantage of it the way that some have or would if they had it but I think that that has probably helped him to be iconoclastic. Everybody wants to be free of the rules and constraints, and *Nibley* succeeds. (Robinson “Trustees in Corner”)

Nibley himself has said that he has never been “called on the carpet” for any of the things which he has said:

When I first came here [to BYU], I went up and asked the Brethren, “I’m blunt about many things. I lack self-control. I’m a silly, shallow, impulsive sort of person. If people start complaining, should I keep my nose clean and keep out of those things?” And the answer was, “That would be the worst thing you could do. We have to have someone to speak out.” . . . I haven’t been called down, I haven’t been rebuked, and I wouldn’t pay much attention if I were. (Bell 38)

Few others are in such a protected and fearless position. Thrilling at Nibley's iconoclastic deeds, professors enjoy repeating the stories of Nibley's feats without being threatened by personal risk. This is one of the reasons they gave for why Nibley is so appealing.

Nibley is able to get away with things others could not. Quite a few years ago there was a portrait display of professors' wives on campus. Under each picture was a tribute to the wife written by the professor-husband. Nibley's tribute was quite unusual: "She knows when to leave me alone." Dan McKinley says his first reaction on reading this was, "Well gee, that's hardly romantic!" He goes on to explain

There were all these neat things said by Steven Covey about his wife. But as I was talking to a good friend who was also a woman, she said that she was quite impressed by that and as I thought about it I [agreed]. He is a person who really needs to have privacy to get into his work. A friend of mine said that Nibley was asked one time, "If you could have the wish of your heart, what would it be?" His answer was, "To be invisible" because people are constantly hounding him. He has an unlisted phone number but if people find out his number and they're watching one of his lectures on TV somewhere in Oregon they'll call him up and say, "What did you mean by that?!" Leave him alone so that he can do his work. (McKinley "Wife Tribute")

While on first glance Nibley's tribute to his wife, Phyllis, might catch many off guard, deeper reflection reveals the compliment he was paying her.

One of the main objects of Nibley's wit is the academic world. Among such Nibley stories about academia, the most repeated story is about the prayer he offered at commencement exercises in 1960: "We have met here today clothed in the black robes of a false priesthood" (Leadership). This story is so popular that people have reported hearing it in California, on the east coast, and even in Europe (Holzapfel "Famous Graduation Prayer"). Nibley himself has supposedly said "that was probably the best thing I've ever done because they've never asked me to pray again" (Dayton "Graduation Prayer"). Nibley doesn't pull any punches when it comes to criticizing his profession with its addiction to tradition, pomp and circumstance. This is actually one of the reasons that Norton gives for liking Nibley so much:

One of the reasons I like him, and this might sound a little perverse, is that he sees, vividly, all of the inherent weaknesses in the academic system. He pokes fun at the pretense, the dogmatism, that typically pervade a university atmosphere. And I had seen that since I had arrived here myself. [whispers] *I realized that most of us were phony*. So I get some kind of perverse satisfaction at seeing someone articulate that, I guess.

("Pokes Fun at Academia")

Although folklorists do not normally examine the motivations of folkheros, it is interesting to note the statements which Nibley has made himself regarding his famous prayer. When asked why he worded the prayer as he did he responded, "I was feeling very strongly on that particular occasion that there was a lot of hypocrisy going on in those days. There was so much fakery, so much bluff going on" (Bell 38). His statement

corresponds with the way in which many interpreted the prayer. But when asked if he enjoys “getting a rise when you say things like that” his response was poignant. “No, I don’t enjoy getting a rise. I wanted to cry at the time” (38). Not all trickster heros seek to possess such a role. But regardless of Nibley’s intentions, those in his audience *do* get a rise out of him and interpret his actions according to their own needs.

As noted earlier, one of the reasons he is able to get away with such jabs is his willingness to risk the consequences. Besides his impeccable record with the LDS Church leaders, Nibley’s lack of interest in any type of monetary reward affords him considerable freedom of speech. For instance, he is completely unworried about clothing styles. “Buying most of his clothes at Deseret Industries, and known to wear jogging shoes with his standard J.C. Penney-circa 1945 suits, Hugh’s first concern in dress has been practicality and not fashion” (Petersen 10). The famous story about his ragged overcoat illustrates this well:

He was wearing this rag-tag overcoat in the mission field and the missionaries felt sorry for him so some of the missionaries, maybe even the Mission President, initiated a collection to buy him an overcoat. He, of course, came from a rather well-to-do family. He heard about [the collection] and he went up to one of the missionaries and said, “You know, here’s thirty dollars--buy him a suit too” (“Rag-tag Coat”).

This same story is told in a different context. Richard Holzapfel tells:

We had a fairly active High Priest’s Quorum. Dallin Oaks, president of the University, was in the ward. The bishop [told me] “We decided that

we were going to raise some money to buy an older member of our ward a coat. He didn't have a nice warm coat. It was winter. So we got the High Priest's Quorum to collect money to actually buy this person a coat. And Nibley came into my office and he said, "Hey, I'll give you \$100 to help this guy." And I looked at him and said, "Hugh, that coat's for you."

(Holzapfel "Ragged Coat")

Whether this second story, or for that matter the first one, is true or not, the moral is the same: Nibley has no regard for his appearance and perhaps does not even care about his warmth. Yet he is the first one willing to stand up and help another who he believes to be in need.

Hugh Nibley is completely unconcerned with wealth. As he has stated several times, including on his *Faith of an Observer* video, he only wants money which will be "sufficient for his needs." As Gary Dayton believes, "He has purposely kept himself in a humble situation. He's always lived in a very humble home. He dresses very plain" ("Humility"). Some people mistakenly assume that when Nibley talks out about wealth he is merely complaining because he is a "poor professor." But Nibley was a wealthy child. So he is certainly well acquainted with both sides of the coin (Welch "Nibley's Youth"). With his immense knowledge and reputation, Nibley certainly could have taught at a more prestigious school than BYU, and he certainly could have chosen a profession which pays more than a professor can earn. But, as Robert Thomas has stated, he left behind "the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome' [for] the modesty that was Provo" (Lundquist 4).

Because he has not sought after riches, Nibley and his family have often had to do without what some people would consider necessities. It is said that early in their marriage Phyllis had to go without buying dresses so that Hugh could buy books. One time in particular Nibley wanted a book on a German philosopher with special marginal notes. The book cost \$150, and that was in the 1960s (Reyna 9). Richard Holzapfel tells of the first time he opened the Nibleys' refrigerator: "It was being held by a piece of wood and it had nothing in it. [It was] an old, broken-down refrigerator with a piece of wood under there to hold it up" ("Family").

Nibley similarly does not care about the condition of his house and yard. He has lived for many years in the same small, mid-city Provo house at the foot of the BYU bench. His unkempt lawn has become legendary, and there are stories ranging from neighbors taking up a petition to make him mow it to President Wilkinson begging him to take action--whereupon Nibley, of course, stakes a goat out on his front lawn to eat the grass (Zmolek 15). John Welch also tells a story of the Elders Quorum showing up one Saturday to clean up his yard as a service project. Instead of being grateful, Nibley forbade them to touch his lawn, saying that if God had wanted it in a different state he would have made grass differently (Welch "On Landscaping").

Worldly success is unimportant to Nibley. For instance, if an editor refuses to publish an article as Nibley has submitted it, he will not let it be published at all. He has never gotten along well with editors. On particularly notorious account relates what took place between Nibley and an editor of the *Improvement Era*, the official, pre-*Ensign*, publication of the LDS Church. Apparently Nibley's footnotes had to be specially

typeset. Because of the lengthy list of footnotes on an average Nibley article, setting type for his article ended up costing more than producing the rest of the magazine. When the editors told him they did not want his footnotes anymore, Nibley responded, “Well, a scholar is nothing without his footnotes. If that’s the way you want it, fine.” And he ended what he told Cracroft was “the longest-running and most unread series of articles in the history of the Church” (Cracroft “Era”). He did not submit any more copy. Within a few months the general membership of the Church realized that Nibley was no longer appearing in print and they protested loudly. The *Era* soon started publishing him again—with complete footnotes (Norton “Era”). Standing above the system, he felt no *need* to be published in the *Era*.

Another story which illustrates his non-reliance on publication arises from the pending publication of *Nibley on The Timely and the Timeless*. The original title, *The Nibley Legacy*, sent Nibley to the editor, Truman Madsen, complaining that he did not like the title, that it sounded as if he were dead. He insisted that because he had not yet finished his work, those articles were not his “legacy.” Madsen pointed out that the title was already on the spine, on the running head of every page and on the dust jacket. He said the only way they could change it would be to take the cost out of the royalties. Of course that is exactly what Nibley insisted on. Madsen asked, “You care that much about the title of a book?” Nibley responded, “No, I just care that little about royalties” (Faith).

He is so above the system that he has never aspired to any positions of power. One professor relates: “One time I saw Nibley walking across campus with mismatched socks on, an ancient sports coat and his signature crumpled hat. He looked at me with a

sly grin and said, ‘They’ll never make me department chairman’” (Peterson).

Though he doubts its veracity, John Welch tells a story which is certainly true to the Hugh Nibley spirit. Welch says that one time they actually made Nibley chairman of the Religion Department. Nibley did not want to accept and even told the administrators that he would not have time to complete the responsibilities, but they insisted that everyone needed to take a turn in positions of leadership. After three months, people realized that no correspondence had been answered and they discovered that Nibley had put all of the department mail unopened into a box on his desk. Soon thereafter Nibley was replaced as department chair (Welch “Department Chair”).

In a newspaper interview Nibley said, “My secret is to lie low. And don’t get into administration, or you’ll never get anything done” (Knight B-1). While many academics covet such positions as department chair or dean, at the same time they admire Nibley for keeping his academic focus and for being unwilling to get caught up in the academic game.

This iconoclasm works because of the things Nibley is rebelling against. It is the negative, worldly, and secular things at which he pokes fun, all-the-while remaining respectful of the sacred things of the kingdom and of that which should be at the heart of academia--learning:

The Nibley stories are important because they confirm the existence of a man who is deeply principled, utterly incorruptible, childlike, and not beholden to any other. He is devoted to the gospel and no other principles. He doesn’t care what people think about him. He doesn’t care

what other scholars say. He is single-minded and dedicated to the building up of the kingdom in his own unique, childlike way. Most of us are overly concerned about what other people think about us. You remember that statement in his video where he says, “We all know the university is neither more nor less than a place to show off.” I think that is mainly why I encourage students to be their own scholars, to be deeply skeptical of what professors and others say, to always question what the texts say. Nibley is the classic iconoclast. He breaks up images. He doesn’t accept armchair history or shallow archeology. He does not accept as valid most of what goes on in the academic world. Nor should any of us. (Norton “The Classic Iconoclast”)

Nibley always manages to keep a spiritual perspective on things:

[Nibley] is open, he’s honest, he’s candid. And he’s a gentle man. He doesn’t openly attack people. He doesn’t judge other people. So in a sense he is a model saint, working in a discipline where the opposite qualities are typically celebrated. So he’s just a refreshing contrast to what you’d typically get in the doctrinaire, dogmatic, unyielding, prideful exercise of the discipline, and he’s exactly the opposite to all that, so in that sense he’s a model scholar. (Norton “Eccentric but Committed”)

Knowing what we know about Nibley--that he is brilliant, that he is faithful, that he is often absent-minded--it seems a certitude that he would become a legend at BYU. And when one adds his principle-based iconoclasm to this three-fold combination, his

legendary status is assured. Nibley speaks his mind, as in the time in the mid-1960s when the Utah Symphony contributed the music for a devotional at BYU. Nibley arrived early and settled in with his notes, in a foreign language of course, and was talking and chuckling to himself about his finds. He listened intently to the music but, when the speaking began, returned to his notes. When President Earl C. Crockett announced that the lecture would be given by a colleague in the Religion Department, Nibley “stood straight up and said, ‘Oh for hell’s sake.’ Then he went straight back to his notes” (Reyna 43).

If he does not like something, he will say it. Librarian Gary Gillum’s wife and Phyllis Nibley both play in the Utah Valley Symphony. Gillum relates,

In a concert situation in the tabernacle if he doesn’t like something, he’s not going to stand during the standing ovation like everybody else and in some cases I’ve even noticed that he doesn’t even applaud. A couple of times I’ve asked him how he liked such and such a concert and he’s very frank about it. He says, “This was pretty lousy,” or “This was just wonderful.” (Gillum “No Standing Ovation”)

A non-conformist, Nibley does not care what people think. “The grass on his lawn was always tall. He dressed like a custodian, and rode an old rickety bicycle. I will never forget that slouchy old hat he always wore. Brother Nibley wasn’t snobbish, he was just unconcerned. He wore baggy old pants, and a baggy sports coat” (Reyna 39). Recently his barber said he came in to get his hair cut and had only one suspender on his trousers. He had lost half of it but still considered them just as useful. (Dayton

“Suspenders”).

Upon the occasion of turning eighty, Nibley mused about the benefits of getting older. He said that at that age, “You’re not under any particular obligation, you can speak the truth, and you have no career interests whatsoever. It’s a marvelous thing” (Bell 33). Hugh Nibley is a non-conformist and iconoclast who does things only if they seem right to him, not caring whether they seem right to the rest of the world.

Chapter Four

Hugh Nibley as Eccentric

Nibley's unquestionable brilliance is but one reason that he stands out among his colleagues at BYU. There are, of course, numerous smart people at universities. It is something else about Nibley, a certain eccentricity, that makes him such a folk hero. Folklorist Michael Owen Jones points out that a hero is often an "eccentric character, or the dynamic individual with unusual personality traits" (244). Unquestionably, Nibley is an eccentric.

One way in which Nibley deviates from established forms is in his lecture style.

One student describes:

When you looked out the door [of the classroom] you could see his office.

The bell would ring for class to begin and his office door would open.

Brother Nibley would come down the hall and four or five steps before he

reached the classroom he would start to lecture. For a whole hour he

[talked] at a locomotive speed. The minute the bell rang, he would shut

his books, walk out, and go back to his office. (Reyna 29)

Another student emphasizes how, at the closing bell, Nibley would immediately stop talking, even if he was in mid-sentence (Sondra Jones 7). And because he spoke so fast that it was impossible to take notes, a student's only hope is to tape-record the lecture. Unfortunately, Nibley does not tend to be too mindful of the tape recorders littering his desk. Back when all tape recorders had to be plugged in, Nibley accidentally tripped over one of the cords. While he was unhurt, the tape recorder smashed to the floor in pieces. Nibley never paused in his lecture (Brady).

Students also must be prepared for Nibley to slip in and out of all kinds of languages (Sondra Jones 10). And he seldom follows a syllabus. Nibley basically lectures on whatever he happens to be studying at the time. Gary Gillum states:

When I took his class, he'd come out of his office and he'd basically continue on what he was doing his research on. He wouldn't follow much of a syllabus. But that was an exciting thing. You were learning how his mind operated. And you caught his enthusiasm. Sometimes that is more important than following a syllabus. I would rather that students be excited about The Book of Mormon and learn some tools for how to study it. ("Manner of Teaching")

Richard Holzapfel had the interesting experience of taking a class from Nibley at the same time he was attending Nibley's Gospel Doctrine class in his ward. (Reportedly, of the three hundred people in the ward, over three hundred people came to Nibley's class [Dayton "Sunday School Teacher"]), the extra amount accounted for by visitors, often referred to as "Niblets," who came from all over the state to learn from Nibley. Holzapfel discovered that between each week of class there were startling gaps in the material covered.

What we discovered [was] he continued discussion from class during the week in Gospel Doctrine. Then when he came to class on Monday, he picked up from Gospel Doctrine. So all of a sudden we went through this Spring term and we realized Nibley had been talking all week and he just kept talking. It didn't matter where he was. He just kept talking [about]

the same thing. I think it happened to be Book of Mormon that year. But we figured out that's what was going on. So now being in his [Gospel Doctrine] class [suddenly] it all made sense. He had this stream of consciousness that went the whole semester. It was really bizarre. When I had other people around tell me "Sometimes I just get lost!" I told them, "Don't worry. You have to go to Sunday School class to catch the break in the middle." (Holzapfel "Continuation of Lectures")

Another story which echoes this same phenomenon is told by Eugene England. When Hugh Nibley was invited to give a lecture for the Know Your Religion series, England was chatting with Nibley before the lecture.

It came time for him to start and I noticed that he had two long [shoe] boxes full of cards down at his side and when it came time for him to begin his lecture he simply looked down without looking (as far as I could tell), took out a huge stack of cards, walked up the front and began speaking from the top card. ("Grabbing Notes from Shoebox ")

England goes on to say that the lecture was "all in other languages and esoteric stuff. The amusing thing was to look around me and here were wonderful old ladies in blue hair and tennis shoes and all the stereotypes and they were scribbling notes like mad. They probably didn't understand a word he was saying but they knew it was all wonderful because it was proving the church is true" (England "Grabbing Notes From Box").

When Nibley lectures, whether at school or at church or at a conference, he

becomes so engrossed in what he is saying that he really doesn't pay attention to his audience:

He really doesn't care what people out there are thinking, or whether they're following him. Some people complain that he mutters a little bit or that he is hard to follow. He never makes an effort to coax the audience along, to stop and repeat himself, to summarize, to say, "Here's what I'm trying to tell you. Am I communicating to you?" That's not Nibley's style. He just talks. And it's up to you to get out of it whatever you're able to get. I'm not sure who his audience is. That's so different than our normal ideas about communication. For him it is a matter of integrity and personal sincerity. He will say what he is going to say. And he's doesn't allow the audience to set his agenda or to manipulate his approach. He's going to be himself no matter what. (Welch "KBYU")

Still, Nibley has won many awards such as Teacher of the Year. Victor Ludlow recalls that once when he had been so honored he went up to receive the plaque and said, "Teacher of the Year! I'm lucky if I have more than twelve students in my class at the end of the semester!" (Ludlow "Teacher of the Year"). Ludlow believes the statement to be true; Nibley is notorious for those low numbers:

You go by his class room the first day of the semester and it is packed with students sitting on the floor and standing in the aisles and the doors [are] open and people [are] standing out in the hallway because everybody wants to take his class. But by the end of the semester he's lucky if there

are students past the first two rows. They just can't keep up with him. His vocabulary [for instance]. You've got to have an excellent background in Ancient Near Eastern history and it helps if you know a few languages and he also uses literary connections. You have to be a very well-educated person to keep up with him. Otherwise he tosses out references, names and terms that just mean nothing to you. After a week or two of this you say, "Hey, I [thought] it would be impressive to sit at his feet but I'm in a constant cloud and a daze." There were very few students that would actually stick with him. (Ludlow "Teacher of the Year")

Apparently Nibley thought it was humorous that he be recognized as Teacher of the Year, apparently implying, "How can you be a great teacher if you can't keep the students there and satisfy their learning demands?" But being Hugh Nibley, he offers a learning opportunity which students would not be able to receive in any normal class.

In the world of academia, once someone is labeled as an eccentric professor, "to such persons are attached many of the current stories which seem to characterize them. The stories told" of Nibley "are the group attached to the beloved and impractical, near-sighted and absent-minded scholar" everywhere (Coffin and Cohen "An Absent-Minded Scholar").

There is a story that dates back to 1797 of a scholar forgetting where he hired a horse and carriage and subsequently drove the streets asking passers-by if they knew who owned them (Coffin and Cohen). The same story, with a different context of course, is

applied to Nibley. He drives to the store and then walks home. When his wife questions him about it he has no idea where the car is (Gillum “Car Left at Store”). An interesting twist on this story was told to me by Nibley’s barber, Gary Dayton. He says that about thirty years ago when he used to cut all of the Nibley boys’ hair they would tell him that sometimes on early Sunday mornings they would have to get together as a family and spread out all over campus to search for their father’s car, hoping to spot it when there were very few cars on campus (Dayton “Kids Search for Car”).

Another cycle of absent-minded professor stories centers in the eccentric forgetting about lunch. Many of the stories told at MIT about Norbert Wiener, the coiner of the word *cybernetics*, are nearly identical to those told about Nibley. Wiener is walking down the hall when a student starts badgering him with questions. When he is done answering, he asks which direction he was facing when the student stopped him. When the student tells him, he responds by saying, “Oh fine. Then I had lunch” (Coffin and Cohen 370). In the Nibley version he is walking along the sidewalk looking perplexed. When the student asks him what is wrong he replies that he can’t remember whether he has eaten lunch yet or not (Zmolek 14).

In addition to being forgetful, both professors are eccentric in other ways, too. “Wiener had this nasty habit, besides wandering into the wrong classroom and scrawling these silly equations on the board, of solving them in his head, which is . . . not only difficult, but noninformative for students” (Coffin and Cohen 371). BYU Professor Ray Gleave describes a similar experience in taking a class from Nibley. He said,

I remember that he had a big thick Greek book. He would start reading it

the minute he came to the door. He would read it in Greek and sometimes translate in[to] English. . . . He would go as fast as he could. Every once in a while he would start chuckling and say, “This is really choice. Too bad you students can’t read Greek.” (“Professor Nibley in Class”)

Nibley’s religion students aren’t the only ones who have difficulty following his trail. He seems to be infamous for what some label his “flawed methodology” (Robinson “Flawed Methodology”)--his sloppy footnotes. As Richard Holzapfel of the religion faculty puts it, “Nibley is a million times smarter than I’ll ever be. I couldn’t even dialogue with the gentleman. He is beyond me. But if you use his stuff, you have to go check it--like you would with any other scholar” (Holzapfel “Sources”). Stephen Robinson, another member of the religion faculty, says, “I have tremendous respect for Nibley. He is ahead of all the rest of us in terms of his intellect--one of the few *true* geniuses that I have met. He’s just not that concerned with scholarly methodology” (Robinson “Flawed Methodology”). Often Nibley uses obscure sources in his books and articles. For instance, when he was in Europe during World War II he scoured every bookstore he came upon. He still owns most of the books he bought there. Sometimes the only copy that his source checkers can find is in Nibley’s garage (Welch “World War II Stories”).

Robinson, who worked as his assistant, tells an illuminating story about Nibley’s research habits. He says,

It was my job to follow after him and double check his footnotes on all the stuff he was writing. At that point he was writing *The Joseph Smith*

Papyra: An Egyptian Endowment. Footnotes for that are all over the map.

We would occasionally find one that was messed up and so it wasn't unheard of for him to make a mistake. He did it all the time. And I tracked one particular reference down. He cited a page number in a certain book and I went there. I got the book and turned to the page number. It was obviously an error because it was in the plates section. It was just photographs and things like that. There was *no* text. So I went to see him at the end of the day and said "We have a broken reference here."

He looked at it and said, "No, no, I'm sure that's right."

"I've got the book right here." I opened it, showed him. I said, "There's no text on the page. It's just photographs."

He looked at it a second and then he said, "Yeah, here it is, right here." And he points to a photograph of a wall of a tomb and he's reading the text off the photograph of the tomb wall. Well what kind of a footnote is that? I mean, Nibley gets criticized by people who don't know the languages and can't follow the research and I thought that that would exacerbate things but he didn't care. He said, "No. As long as it's there, I don't care. I don't care if they can read it." (Robinson "Temple Citation")

Well-documented, this "I don't care" attitude conveniently fits the eccentric professor mold. As some faculty members have put it, his mind is on higher things and cannot be bogged down with the mundane; they label him as an impractical genius. As Tristram Coffin says, "Americans show a certain uneasy respect for Einsteins and Norbert

Wieners, but since they are not quite sure what these geniuses are up to, they tell stories about their ineptitude in everyday matters” (Coffin and Cohen “Big Men Put Down”).

This is not to imply that people concoct the idea that Nibley is sloppy with footnotes and documentation, nor to suggest that documentation is unimportant. With almost all folklore there has to be a spark of truth to get the stories started. But of note is that, first, being meticulous with footnotes appears not to be a priority for Nibley. As Gary Gillum put it, “Footnotes he is pretty bad at. But that’s because he feels he has to do it to make certain people happy. It’s not making him happy. He’s got such a strong testimony of the gospel that he doesn’t need to convince people with footnotes. He can do it with his own words” (Gillum “Impatient with Mediocrity”). Secondly, professors seem to enjoy these sloppy footnote stories. In Coffin’s words, “Curiously, these stories are often relished by other scholars, who seem to share the common desire to see their betters exhibit human frailty” (Coffin and Cohen “Big Men Put Down”).

Though he may not be as concerned about his footnotes as some academics, there are at least some stories about his emphasis on them. Once he left a message for the editor of the magazine he was working for which said that he would not be in to work the next day--Nibley had driven off to California to check a footnote for an article (Knight B-12). It seems safe to say that Nibley cares about scholastic conventions, only he cares in a different way than most professors. He sees such conventions not as an end in themselves, but as useful only when they serve a purpose.

Although some might see it as a big stretch to include footnote practices under the eccentric professor umbrella, it is certainly no stretch to include Nibley’s eccentric

appearance. Gary Gillum, author of *The Nibley Quote Book*, calls it “the Einstein Syndrome. Einstein hardly ever matched his socks. That wasn’t important to him. And Nibley, he’ll wear tennis shoes from K-Mart with a black suit and his fishing hat. He just wears clothes to cover his body. He’s not worried about fashion or that kind of thing” (Gillum “Car Left at Store”).

There are many funny stories about Nibley and his clothes. It is well known that he often wears mismatched socks (Madsen 11):

Dr. Nibley is likely to show up to class with a suit coat that belongs to the suit pants he didn’t wear, mismatched socks, and a tie that doesn’t come close to matching his shirt. Often he will wear the same thing over and over for weeks, or he will consistently wear ragged appearing clothing. None of this is because he can’t afford to buy good clothing; he just doesn’t think about it. (Jones 6)

Susan Rasmussen relates that, “One of the faculty members was purring about what a good deal he had gotten on a suit he had bought on sale. Nibley was walking by and said, ‘See mine? Got it free--in my neighbor’s trash can’” (Zmolek 7). Nibley often brags about getting all of his clothing from friends, declaring that there are better uses for money than to buy clothes with it (Zmolek 6). Because he is focused on more crucial things, sometimes Nibley will show up for class wearing slippers, and he often comes with pieces of toilet paper stuck to his face covering where he cut himself while shaving (McKinley “Slippers”).

His reputation gets pushed to the extreme in the story that because Nibley dresses

in such a ragamuffin fashion, one time when his car broke down in California he was arrested for vagrancy when he was trying to hitchhike to a gas station. Dressed as shabbily as he was, the police had a difficult time believing that he was actually a college professor (Reyna 36). Nibley has more important things than fashion on his mind.

In fact, Nibley has so many important things on his mind that, some stories stress, he often ignores what apparently seem to him everyday annoyances. This single-minded attention to his brain is another reason he is labeled “eccentric.” “A neighbor recalls that when people came to the Nibley door in California, young Hugh (just a teen-ager) would open the door, admit the visitor to the house and close the door, all the while never lifting his eyes from the book he was reading. For all he knew, he could be letting in a burglar” (Knight B-1).

Another story which illustrates his habit of being so deeply engrossed in thought that the world goes on unnoticed around him is one recounted earlier, where Nibley, working in his carrel in the library late one night and asked by a janitor to help fix a leaky pipe, soon had the flashlight focused on his book so that he could continue to study (Robinson “Flashlight in Library”). Another time Nibley did not evacuate his office when there was a flood in the building. As the janitor was investigating, “he found Nibley perched on top of his desk with his research papers piled around him completely ignoring the stream of water running through his office” (Knight B-12).

Stories such as these eccentric professor tales are delightful to tell and to hear; they are “water cooler” anecdotes which tend to be repeated often because they are so funny, entertaining and leveling.

Chapter Five

Hugh Nibley as Latter-day Saint Spiritual Guide

At Brigham Young University, where 93% of the student body and faculty are Latter-day Saint, and when the university's stated purposes are an unabashed fusion of the intellectual *and* the spiritual, the definition of "important things" no doubt differs decidedly from the definition prevalent at MIT, Yale, Harvard, or even Notre Dame. In this respect, BYU is unique. Hugh Nibley is unique, also, among eccentric professors because he is respected not only for his intellect but also for his spirituality. Nibley clearly fits a criterion Michael Owen Jones says is necessary for one to become a hero to a group of people: "the individual must be recognized by others as a potential hero, and eventually he must be conceived of as epitomizing specific values of great significance to certain individuals in particular circumstances" (Jones 245-246). It follows that his fellow saints would admire him at BYU, a religious university, since he represents and embodies values that Latter-day Saints share.

There is a story about Nibley visiting his son Charles when he lived in San Francisco. Nibley had paced the floors all night, not sleeping at all. In the morning his son asked him if he were ill. Nibley responded, "No, there's just so much evil in this city I couldn't rest" (Holzapfel "No Rest in San Fran"). In fact, Nibley is keenly attuned to matters of the spirit. At the same time, he represents values shared by academics. Latter-day Saints believe that: "The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth" (Doctrine and Covenants 93:36). As an academic and a Latter-day Saint, Nibley excels not only in matters of intelligence but in matters of faith.

Nibley is a notorious temple-goer. Every Thursday he trudges up the hill with his

little suitcase. Prior to entering the temple for the first time, many Latter-day Saints study Nibley's writings about the temple. His influence is considerable. For example, because of his writings, I feel as if I first went to the temple knowing more than many who had been attending their whole lives. So great was his impact on my temple-going experience that one day, when I was a newlywed, I waited on a bench outside the temple until I saw him coming, so that I could attend a session at the same time as he did. Knowing all of the stories, especially that he says he learns something new every time he goes through the temple, I felt there would be something magical about being in the temple rooms with him. To me, and many other Latter-day Saints, he has become an icon of spiritual knowledge and righteousness. I wanted to share his temple-going experience. My experience is replicated in the lives of thousands who admire his unique fusion of intellectual and spiritual.

Hugh Nibley has taught so many people so much about the temple, and about other spiritual issues, that many Latter-day Saints have come to see him as a possessor of hidden riches of the kingdom. Latter-day Saints believe that he has access to unrevealed information because he is transcendently faithful and because he has made the effort, by study and faith, to find things out and make connections. For example, Boyd Nielsen tells of Nibley speaking at an Education Week in California. He was discoursing on the creation, using ancient records to elucidate the scriptures. "He came to a point and stopped, saying, 'Brothers and sisters, I wish we were in the temple so I could continue reading this'" (Zmolek 12). Nielsen's interest was so captured that he was determined to find out what Nibley knew but wasn't saying. After the lecture, he went up to the

podium to talk with Nibley and asked if he might be able to look at Nibley's manuscript. Nibley obliged, but Nielsen found the manuscript was in Coptic picture writing.

Another story illustrates the widespread belief that Nibley has access to information which has not been generally revealed. It is told that Nibley was not at all surprised when the Joseph Smith papyri were discovered in the basement of a museum in Chicago. "He wasn't surprised because he knew where they had been all along. Furthermore, he was not impressed by their discovery because he knows, and has known, where all of the lost manuscripts are" (Jones 36).

Nibley's spirituality is also demonstrated by his personal ministry with others and by his success as a missionary. He taught the gospel to and baptized a famous basketball star, Kresimer Cosic, who had been recruited from the Yugoslavian Olympic team to play basketball at BYU. When he first came to BYU, the young man, a communist and an atheist, spoke no English. When Kresimer's roommate Zee Menchek became engaged to Hugh Nibley's daughter, the two Yugoslavian roommates began taking the discussions. Apparently during the very first discussion Kresimer was touched by the spirit and decided he wanted to get baptized, but Nibley finished teaching him all of the discussions before he baptized him.

On the day that Kresimer was baptized in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, he and Nibley went in to get their white clothing. The women behind the counter were in shock, stunned because the day before the supervisor had advised them to complete their inventory with clothing for very tall individuals. When Nibley was asked if he believed that the supervisor had been inspired or if it had just been luck he replied, "You decide."

Kresimer went on to become a very strong member of the Church and would hold many positions of authority in Yugoslavia. In the summer of 1995, while Kresimer was dying in Bethesda Hospital in Maryland, Nibley flew out to see him the day before he died. An amazing missionary when the gospel is the common element between them, Nibley has the ability to mingle not only with the intellectual but also with the athlete (Dayton “Kresimer”).

Nibley’s faith in the Latter-day Saint religion is so unwavering that many have labeled him as a defender of the faith. However, opinion is divided as to whether this is a good thing. Some consider him an apologist, who already knows where he wants to get before he begins and is so eager to get his bridge built that he “sometimes incorporates a rotten timber here or there” (Robinson “Flawed Methodology”). Any scholar who knows conclusions before investigation is necessarily an apologist and scholasticist. In fact, most Latter-day Saints are purposeful in knowing their spiritual destination and that the gospel is true. “These revelations are correct and so [we] start building a bridge to get there, discarding evidence that would lead somewhere else and incorporating all the evidence that goes in the direction that we want” (Robinson “Defender of the Faith”).

Richard Holzapfel tells a story about how Nibley may have reached his pinnacle of faith in the gospel. He says there was a period in Nibley’s life when he had doubts (stories from other sources echo this), but he underwent some experiences where he became “otherworldly”; then there was no further doubt. Holzapfel says, when Nibley was young, he used to:

refer to himself as an atheist, but maybe just agnostic. Elder Cowley was

speaking in Glendale. As he was speaking he stopped. He looked down at Hugh and said, “You have a question. I don’t know what the question is, I just know that you are going to get an answer.” And that was an early experience of Nibley’s where he felt like God knew him and was concerned. As a series of things happened to him, his world view changed to where God is God and Joseph Smith is a real prophet and those issues aren’t debatable for him anymore. So in one sense he starts off *knowing* that it’s true so, the thing is, how can he present it the best way he can? That isn’t to say that he’s closed-minded because he is critical of certain things about our church and about things we believe and about how we act; he’s willing to do that. But on a certain level, about whether the church is true or [whether] the gospel is really restored, the issue is closed. He knows. His job now is to figure out how to prove it. (Holzapfel “Apologist”)

It’s a little like a scientist who has discovered an end result and now needs figure out how to get from step A to Z. The experiment in a certain sense is already over. The search is for the best way to explain it.

Because of his unique combination of skills, values, and beliefs, Nibley has become an influential figure at BYU and throughout the LDS Church. He fills a room with his presence. Even outsiders to BYU, perhaps *especially* outsiders to BYU, can identify this aura. Professor Sam Rushforth of the Botany Department tells about the Clean Air Symposium held at BYU in the mid-1980s. Rushforth was hosting several

Environmental Protection Agency officials:

When Hugh Nibley was speaking I was standing at the south windows with those guys. We were having a conversation and then Nibley started talking. They looked at the audience responses and then they looked at this guy and they kept saying to me, “Who *is* this guy?! Who is this Nibley guy?! What in the world is going on here?!” It was a kick for me not only to see the audience response to Nibley but that *they* caught on that he was somebody special and that they could see that interaction. They were very, very interested in the whole sequence of events that they saw unfolding. (Rushforth “Clean Air Symposium”)

Because Nibley is so well-respected at BYU and because so many people believe that he is more knowledgeable than the rest of us, especially on religious matters, he is looked to as a prophet of sorts. Richard Holzapfel tells of being an undergraduate and taking a religion class from Nibley. The class, in the old Joseph Smith Building, had high windows which let in lots of sun. Nibley had been lecturing on the last days and the signs of the times:

It was just one of those days when the sun was coming in the room just right so he kind of looked like a prophet. We were young and enthusiastic and here was our prophet speaking to us. All of a sudden he stopped and he walked over to the window and he gazed out. Realistically it was just a minute or two but it felt like an hour. He didn’t say anything, he just gazed out the window. Then he turned around to us and he said, “It’s too late.”

And that was it. The class was over. He left. So we're all like, "No! What! The Second Coming's tomorrow?!" We all walked out with this really weird feeling it was eerie, and wow! Nibley was this prophet. (Holzapfel "Nibley the Prophet")

Holzapfel still does not know what happened that day. Nibley could have been saying it was too late to turn his taxes in. But Holzapfel uses the word *eerie* to describe the event, going on to explain that there was something otherworldly about Nibley, whom he considers a transcendent person who walks around BYU campus in a different world, and who, on the basis of his intellect and faith, has the power to act as a prophet.

Hugh Nibley has become a mythic figure at BYU. He embodies what William A. Wilson calls the "value center" of BYU. Steven Robinson states:

He embodies for us certain virtues, and any story that is designed to illustrate those virtues gravitates to Nibley. Any evaluation that would go the opposite direction is immediately rooted out by that emotional part of us that wants him to be the font of academic and intellectual virtue. That is the mechanism. And he's passed over into the mythic so that I'm sure the stories about him will continue and grow and get better and better-- because of the emotional need it satisfies for the community of BYU-- trying to make an uneasy marriage between the things of the spirit and the things of the world. Learning of the spirit and learning of the world. He becomes our champion. (Robinson "Type Figure")

Some of the most interesting stories I have gathered on Nibley haven't been about

his intelligence or eccentricity at all. These stories are about Nibley standing perfectly still in the middle of the flow of things, as if he were on a different plane. Back in 1969, Darwin Hayes said:

The first time I saw him I thought he was a custodian. The second time I saw him he was walking down the stairs to the pond, reading a book. I thought he was going to fall, but he didn't seem concerned. The third time was in the Grant Library. He was reading a book and every once in a while he would stop and look off into space. Then after a few minutes he would give a big smile and jot down some notes. (Reyna 38)

Richard L. Anderson tells of waiting in his car at the bottom of the south steps of the old Joseph Smith Building. He noticed Nibley start down the steps reading a book. "He'd take a step and read a little and take a step and read a little. When he reached the lower groups of steps it took him nine-and-a-half minutes to come down that last tier of steps, taking a step and reading his book" (Madsen 16).

Richard Holzapfel tells of his coming up to campus one morning and noticing Nibley off in the bushes picking berries:

I came up on campus and there he was. I had gotten to know him by this time so I was unafraid. I went up and asked him, "What's going on? What are you up to?" He was staring up past the temple. He says, "Oh, look up there. Look at Rock Canyon. Look at that wall right there. See that?" I looked up there, "Oh yeah, yeah. I kind of see that." He goes, "I've never noticed that before." He just was staring. He'd been up there

harvesting then all of a sudden he was standing up there looking at this thing. And I thought, how many times has he gone up this hill and yet it was like a new thing for him. I remember that day how students were busily coming up on campus, with bikes and walking. And he was totally oblivious to everyone coming by. He was just doing his deal. It's really otherworldly. (Holzapfel "Picking Berries")

One of the roles which Nibley plays for the people at BYU is that of spiritual guide. He is a prototype of how the spiritual and intellectual can join within one person to embody Latter-day Saint ideals and goals.

Chapter Six

Hugh Nibley as Humble but Vigorous Defender of the Faith

Nibley's single-minded concentration in the field of academic pursuits is one of the principle traits of his which make him a model scholar. That passion, coupled with his eccentric persona, has elevated him to legendary status. Nibley may be brilliant, eccentric, outspoken, and different, but he is certainly not Other, for underlying all that he does and says is a deep and unwavering commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Never suspect, Nibley is unquestionably a member of the Mormon community--one of the necessary elements of being a model Mormon scholar. The other is the fact that his eccentricity enables him to look at things in a new, innovative and influential way. He thereby propels the community of saints into new areas of scholarship while remaining true to their value center.

None of the professors I interviewed expressed even the slightest doubt as to Nibley's faithfulness. On the contrary, most stressed his church devotion as one of his strongest and most admirable attributes. Don Norton says,

He's an eccentric man. He is also gifted. I think that is the main reason that you can tell stories about Hugh and can tolerate his eccentricities. In his old age he is becoming kind of outspoken and so on, but in an unqualified way he is committed to the gospel. There is no question where he stands or where his commitment is, so he is easy to forgive for all his eccentricities. He has no reservations at all; he doesn't make excuses. He is rock solid. ("Eccentric but Committed")

Many of the other professors, through their stories, conveyed a similar picture of Nibley.

He may be acting in an unconventional way, for instance, in forbidding his daughter to attend seminary (Cracroft "Seminary"), but the motivation for his action is believed to be an awareness of and adherence to a higher law.

Nibley's being attuned to this higher law gives him a certain consistency.

Unaffected by the siren call of worldly fame, he is steadfast and unmoving. Gary Hatch pointed out that perhaps there had been a mighty change for Nibley somewhere along the line. Early in his career he seemed to focus more on worldly scholarship, but there came a point when he turned his attention almost completely to Mormon scholarship (such as his studies of The Book of Mormon).

Hatch reports that some people have accused Nibley of being an apologist, that instead of a true intellect with an open mind looking for any answer, he is looking for what he has preconceived--this is scholasticism, or defending the faith in order to leave religion pure or intact. One doesn't have to look far to find books in which Nibley defends the Mormon religion. For instance, one of the prime objectives of *Myth Makers*, *Sounding Brass*, and *Since Cumorah*, is to directly respond to anti-Mormon criticism. The most famous of Nibley's "defender of the faith" articles is his, "No Ma'am, That's Not History," a direct response to Fawn Brodies' *No Man Knows My History* in which she discredited Joseph Smith. Some professors have pointed out that Nibley is asked to do this defending by the leaders of the Mormon Church. Apparently Nibley prefers not to defend his beliefs to others, that in some way he considers it a waste of time, but that Nibley believes it fulfills a duty to illustrate to outsiders what Mormons believe and why.

Countering the argument that Nibley's preconceived expectations are negative is

the opinion many professors expressed--that he already knows what he wants to find simply because he has researched every possibility and has studied every side until he has found the whole truth--the LDS religion--and everything *does* fall in line with that. As one professor puts it,

Nibley said, "When I found that I could get anything published anywhere, I was no longer interested in publishing." So I think he had just decided to test his capacity as a scholar. I don't think there was any change. I think he just said, "Well now that I know I can play the world's game, I'm going to dedicate myself to the building up of the kingdom." I don't think there was any evolution of commitment or reorientation of thinking--that's too typical of skeptics in the church. [laughs] Well, Nibley never makes mistakes like that. He just realized there was a lot of shoddy scholarship in the Church: among critics of the Church, archaeologists in the Church, historians in the Church, theologians in the Church; and he exposed them all--simply by doing better scholarship. (Norton "Scholarship in the Church")

Another possible explanation for this shift in emphasis is that Nibley reportedly had a near-death experience at approximately the same time as his academic shift. But none of the professors mentioned this as a motivating possibility. Clearly, these stories are not ultimately about Hugh Nibley; they reveal insights into the people who tell the stories and claim them for their own.

One of the characteristics that the professors found most charming about Nibley is

his childlike humility amidst his phenomenal accomplishments. Having edited three volumes of Nibley's complete works, Don Norton has had firsthand experience in interacting with Nibley and believes that Nibley underestimates his contribution. He tells the story of a publication party with Nibley and his wife after one of the volumes came off the press. Nibley appeared honored that the volumes had ever “seen the light of day.” Nibley said to him on another occasion, “You know, I was reading through some of that old stuff I used to write. There’s some pretty good stuff there.” With all of his knowledge and with his huge printed legacy, he remains humble and kind. “He’s still very childlike in his eagerness to learn and his acknowledgment that anybody and everybody is in a position to teach him” (“Underestimates Contribution”).

The barbers in the BYU Barbershop often have doctrinal questions to ask Nibley when he comes in for his haircut. “He will explain it to you in a kindly way but then he will say, ‘But what do I know about it?’” (Dayton “Barbershop Questions”). Nibley so underestimates his contribution that he labels his lifelong pursuit of knowledge as merely “dabbling” (Knight B-1). Although he has authored dozens of articles and books, he remains humble about his academic contribution. He goes so far as to say he does not feel he has done anything yet for which he will be remembered. Yet at the same time many in the BYU community have expressed the opinion that no one can do any truly original LDS work because Nibley has already done it and filed it away (Zmolek 16). Yet Nibley says, “I do hope to do something I can be remembered for” (Irvine 5).

Gary Dayton tells that Nibley believes he is meant to finish the book he is working on now, having received the definite impression that the Lord will preserve his

life until the book is completed. He has been working on it a long time, but he says he intends to work on it a lot longer. “If I don’t finish it for a long time, I’m going to live a long time” (Dayton “Last Book”). What impresses Dayton most in this anecdote is at once Nibley’s extreme faith and his keen sense of humor.

It is interesting to note that when asked what he would do were he twenty-two again, Nibley did not say he would study more--in fact he insists he would spend a lot *less* time studying Arabic. He didn’t say he would try to pursue a more lucrative field than academia, nor did he say that he would do everything exactly the same as he has done. Instead, he said that he would “pray like heck. If I were young, I’d seek the advice of the Lord in all I do” (Maynes 7).

Though Hugh Nibley may be the most innovative and capacious scholar in BYU history, he may well be remembered more for his eccentricities. And even more than for his manifold peculiarities, Nibley will likely be remembered for his spirituality, to whose heroic proportions all might do well to aspire.

Chapter Seven

Hugh Nibley as BYU Icon: Conclusion

Hugh Nibley is a figure which the BYU community over five decades has latched onto as an individual who represents the university's divine and unique purpose. Bruce C. Hafen, former BYU Provost and now a LDS General Authority, captured well, in his 1995 university conference address, the essence of Nibley that faculty, staff and students have always found so appealing:

As I left the statisticians to go to my office that morning, I saw Hugh Nibley walking toward me near the ASB parking lot. Suddenly he stopped walking, turned around, and began looking intently northward. The inimitable Nibley removed his sunglasses, tipped back his canvas hat, and stood transfixed, as though his eyes drank in a vision. Then I saw what had stopped him--and an aesthetic and spiritual view of BYU replaced the statistical one. A clearing storm and rising sun had left a ring of heavy, low clouds around the neck of Mt. Timpanogas, like a richly flowered lei. The familiar Timp skyline poked above the clouds, glistening in the sunlight with a light layer of fresh snow, the white peaks contrasting brilliantly with the blue sky and the full green foreground. I stopped too, looking not just at Timp but at Hugh Nibley looking at Timp. No matter how many hundreds of times he had seen that mountain, no matter how full his head from his latest reading and his always brimming stream-of-consciousness, Hugh looked up longingly at Timp. He didn't take it for granted. For Nibley, Timp is like a wonderful poem or painting

or scripture or trip to the temple--always revealing new meaning and new inspiration to those who probe its depths. (Hafen 31)

Hafen chose to tell this story for good reason. As human beings, we need to tell stories in order to make meaning out of our lives. And as groups we need shared stories. One of the main cycles of stories around which BYU has built its identity are the stories of Hugh Nibley. When Hafen wanted to illustrate that the faculty and staff of BYU must marry the spiritual with the academic, that they should consider themselves on holy ground at their university, what better way to drive his point home than with a story, “a story” which, writes Neil Postman, “gives us direction by providing a kind of theory about how the world works” (Postman). And what better person to pick as the hero of that story than Hugh Nibley, who gives BYU focus and direction by exemplifying the ideal of academic and spiritual excellence.

Because the BYU community has heard so many Nibley stories in the past and because each member of the community knows who Nibley is and what he is about, Hafen’s story was even more powerful. When he described the busy and energetic Nibley standing and staring in awe at the beauty of the mountains, everyone got the point. His story made sense and was convincing because everyone present knew of Nibley’s intelligence, profound spirituality, and manifold accomplishments. Yet even he took time to appreciate the sacredly beautiful in life. For the people of BYU, Dr. Hugh Winder Nibley represents an ideal. Because of this, he has become and will likely long remain a flourishing BYU legend.

Works Cited

- Abrahams, Roger D. "Some Varieties of Heroes in America." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 3 (1966): 341-62.
- Bell, James P. "Hugh Nibley in Black and White: An Interview With Hugh Nibley." *BYU Today* May 1990: 32-41.
- Coffin, Tristram Potter, and Henning Cohen, eds. *The Parade of Heroes: Legendary Figures in American Lore*. Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978.
- Dorson, Richard M. *American Folklore*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.
- Fine, Elizabeth. *The Folklore Text: From Performance to Print*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.
- Hafen, Bruce C. "Come, Come, Ye Saints." Provo: Brigham Young University Conference, 1995.
- Irvine, Arnold J. "Hugh Nibley: Profile of a Scholar." *Deseret News' Utah Magazine* 15 Apr. 1984: 4-6.
- Ives, Ed. *Tape-recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980.
- Jackson, Bruce. *Fieldwork*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Jones, Michael Owens. "(PC+CB) X SD (RD+I+E)=HERO." *New York Folklore Quarterly* 27 (1971): 243-260.
- Jones, Sondra. *Hugh Nibley: The Legend*. Provo: Brigham Young University Folklore Archives #286, 1971.
- Knight, Hal. "Behind the Legend, There's a Man. . . ." *Deseret News*. 1 Sep. 1976: B1 and B12.

- Lundquist, John M., and Stephen D. Ricks, eds. *By Study and Also By Faith*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1990.
- Madsen, Susan. *Hugh Nibley: A Legend in His Own Time*. Brigham Young University Folklore Archives #576, 1971.
- Maynes, Todd F. "Nibleys: Pianist, Scholar, Brilliant But Different." *Daily Universe* 1 Nov. 1982: 1, 7.
- Meyer, Richard E. "The Outlaw: A Distinctive American Folktype." *Journal of Folklore Institute* 17 (1980): 94-124.
- Nibley, Hugh. "An Intellectual Autobiography." In *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*. Ed. Truman G. Madsen. Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1978.
- . "Leadership vs. Management." Video of commencement address delivered 19 August 1983. Distributed by Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1988.
- Petersen, Boyd. "Breaking the Mold: A Look at Two Mormon Folk Heroes." : University of Maryland Folklore Archives.
- Postman, Neil. "Learning By Story." *Atlantic*. Vol 264, no. 6 (Dec 1989): 119-124.
- Spradley, James. *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979.
- Toelken, Barre. "The Folklore of Academe." Appendix to Jan Harold Brunvand's *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1968.
- Wilson, William A. "Folklore and History: Fact Amid the Legends." *Readings in American Folklore*. Ed. Jan Harold Brunvand. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979.

449-66.

---. "On Being Human: The Folklore of Mormon Missionaries." Lecture given at the Sixty-fourth Annual Faculty Lecture in the Humanities at Utah State University on November 18, 1981.

---. "The Paradox of Mormon Folklore." *BYU Studies* 17 (Autumn 1976): 40-58.

---. "The Study of Mormon Folklore: An Uncertain Mirror for Truth." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22 (Winter 1989): 95-110.

---. "Trickster Tales and the Location of Cultural Boundaries: A Mormon Example." *Journal of Folklore Research* 20 (1983b): 55-66.

Zmolek, Liliane. "Nibley: Fact and Fiction." Brigham Young University Folklore Archives #462, 1980.

Note to Appendix

All sixteen of my interviews were conducted in a similar manner. Before beginning my interviewing I studied Bruce Jackson's *Fieldwork* and James Spradley's *The Ethnographic Interview*. I scheduled appointments with the informants. At the appointment I set up a tape recorder (utilizing suggestions from Ed Ives's book on *The Tape Recorded Interview*). I began the interview by asking them for a brief biographical sketch. I then asked them what Hugh Nibley stories they had heard and continue to tell. I asked them to tell me only stories that they would feel comfortable sharing with others, in other words, no stories which they considered too personal or sacred. Towards the end of the interview I asked them to sum up why they believed Hugh Nibley is such a legend at BYU.

I transcribed each of the interviews, grouping the stories under titles. If in any case I found it necessary to clarify meaning, I inserted my own words into their quotes, setting my insertion apart by the use of brackets. All interviewees had a chance to revise their transcripts. Richard Cracroft, Gary Dayton, Eugene England, Gary Gillum, Gary Hatch, Richard Holzapfel, Don Norton, Steve Walker, Jack Welch and William Wilson did proofread and edit their texts.

Richard H. Cracroft 10/3/94

born June 28, 1936 in Salt Lake City, UT

Background

Cracroft is a professor at BYU and has been Hugh Nibley's friend since the 1960s. From 1973-1983, Professor Cracroft served as Nibley's Stake President and it was in this capacity that he learned many of his stories. Cracroft has edited many LDS books and teaches LDS literature. He currently acts as the head of the Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature.

High Council

I called [Hugh] in one time and said, "Hugh you've never been a bishop, you've never been a Stake President, you've never held any positions like this. Why not?" He sort of shrugged his shoulders. I said, "How would you like to serve on my high council?"

And he said, "Oh that would be fun." He said, "Provided that you don't just sit around and talk about problems and sit around and talk about things that could be improved and changed and provided that you didn't sit and waste my time that I could be using elsewhere to talk about the governments and other things of the church." He says, "I'm not interested in those kind of things. That's just a waste of my time. If you don't do that then I would be happy to be on the high council."

And I said, "Hugh, you know, maybe we don't need you on the high council." [laughs] "Because that's what we do. We sit around and we talk about things like that." So I signed his recommend and he went on his way. And he would always be a delightful recommend interview and we had a lot of fun that way.

Wilkinson Skit

One year Hugh wrote, at the request of the BYU Women, a skit--a sketch, which was to be given at their opening dinner. And it was to *mock* Ernest L. Wilkinson--the president of the university. And I, uh, got called in on it because the president of the association that year said, ah, (it was Bill Pope's wife, Margaret Pope--the sister to Bruce McConkie) and she thought that the humor was a little caustic and she didn't want to detract from the aura of the President of the University. Would I rewrite the thing? And I say, "Hey, you're asking *me* to rewrite Hugh Nibley's stuff." And I said, "I'll work with him." So Hugh and I got together and I revised and rewrote and toned down but we still made it pretty caustic and we got up there and Hugh was dressed as a sultan or Turkish Harem Holder and I was one of his, his slaves. And we had a wonderful exchange, repartee which is being put in his complete works I understand. Anyway, Hugh Nibley was willing to get out and perform and be very, very funny and caustic. And we looked down in the first row President Wilkinson, he ate it up, he enjoyed the whole thing. But it was fun to see the caustic wit at work here of Hugh Nibley.

Seminary

One day a seminary teacher, several weeks into the new year came to Hugh's home and

said, "Ah, we're very concerned that Martha has not been coming to, to seminary. And ah she's registered for this course and she hasn't shown up for the last several weeks."

And Hugh said, "Well I'm concerned too." He said, "I'm just terrified and shocked." He said, "I've told Martha not to take seminary courses. This is devastating to the spirit and to the testimony to take those kind of courses. Now I've told her a dozen times to stay away from that kind of corrupting influence in the church." He said, "I'm just shocked to know that she has gone ahead and signed up for courses like that." He said, "You bet. I'll talk with her." And, ah, this was not quite the response, as I understand, that the seminary teacher expected.

Brady "What do you think that story tells about his character?"

Cracroft "I think it's talking about Hugh as iconoclast. The fact that generally you can count on Hugh to come down on the opposite side of most any issue. And even in things so certain and so sacred as seminary, which everyone knows one must take--this is authorized by the Lord and the Brethren--even there Hugh puts his finger on the weakness of the seminary teachers. Often seminary teachers titillate with fringe topics to keep the students coming. Through this story Nibley emphasized that for me the gospel is centered in the scriptures and not in the interpretations of men."

Defender of the Faith

Brady "Some of the stories fit in line with the eccentric professor, similar with all universities. He is someone who is *so* interested in scholarly work with an armful of books walking into the library and teaching students while walking along. Somewhere along the line for him there seemed to be a focus on religious things primarily as opposed to simply scholarly things--moving to the scholarly of Zion. Some people have accused him of being apologetic. Instead of being a true intellect who has an open mind and will look for any answer, instead he is looking for what he has preconceived. That he already knows what he wants to find. Or you could say that he has researched every side and has found the whole truth in our religion and everything *does* fall in line with that.

Cracroft "And of course that is the way he sees it and I think probably what all of the young scholars now have an advantage and opportunity to see even further in those areas in which Nibley has been engaged and he has not been able to see everything and now they delight in pointing out the things he hasn't seen. It is just the modern attempt to humble Hugh, to bring him down. And I say, "More power to Hugh Nibley." I think there is that tendency that we have very much with us--revisionism is always going on--and he is a victim of revisionism. And sometimes, I think, he has also been guilty. I think this is most evident in his defense of Fawn--of Joseph Smith against the attacks of Fawn Brodie in her book with his "No Ma'am, That's Not History." I think sometimes you see he can be so eager to defend that he gets picky in picking apart the other peoples' arguments and her arguments and sometimes in picking apart the little details one begins to sense that he, too, is distorting the picture a little bit and I think that is probably true. And probably the truth is somewhere in between. That Joseph Smith was not as Fawn Brodie portrayed but, ah, some of her arguments are not as bad as Hugh Nibley makes

them out to be. It really comes down to whether you take a mantic or a sophic position. She took a sophic position and Hugh takes a mantic position. And over and over we have these young scholars who are even taking sophic positions and, ah, Hugh has always kept the mantic, that spiritual, perspective."

It's Greek to Me

He gave the first faculty lecture at the university back in the mid-sixties, maybe sixty-four or sixty-five, I don't remember when, but my wife and I were there. He gave it in the Smith Family Living Center and he kind of wandered onto the stage after the introduction and there were maybe two, three hundred of us there and ah, he got up and it wasn't a prepared lecture, it was Hugh Nibley. And he just started talking and then he said, 'Oh you can't understand this unless you understand the Greek.' And then he wrote on the blackboard in Greek the sentence. And then he said, 'Of course this works even better in Latin.' Then he went into Sanskrit. And he was just mumbling to himself about this 'See!' And he'd get excited about the point and he would point to this scribble on the board and you could tell he was off in an *exciting* adventure. And we could only sense the excitement and we could not understand the content. And so everybody began that roaring look at each other-- that laugh and that undertoned voice, we would all laugh. We were not laughing at Hugh Nibley; we were laughing at his eccentricity and his enthusiasm and we were appreciative but we certainly were not *enlightened*. All we were enlightened by was, "Well we don't know what he's saying but we have faith it must be right and this somehow must demonstrate the gospel and aren't we grateful that Hugh is demonstrating the gospel is true even though we haven't got the slightest idea what he is saying." And that was a bunch of educated men and women who simply stood in admiration of the *manner* of the man rather than anything he was saying in terms of *content*.

Era

[After Nibley had pulled his articles from the Church magazine he had said] he ended what was the longest running and most unread article in the history of the Church.

Gary Dayton 3/25/96

born in 1935 in Heber City, Utah

Background

Gary is a barber in the BYU barbershop. He has occasionally cut Hugh Nibley's hair. He has also cut the hair of some of Nibley's children. He has had direct contact with Nibley over the years. He greatly enjoys telling and hearing stories about the man that he greatly admires.

Kids Search for Car

About thirty years ago when I was cutting all of the Nibley boys' hair they would tell me that sometimes on early Sunday mornings they would have to get together as a family and spread out all over campus to search for their father's car, hoping to spot it when there were very few cars on campus.

Suspenders

I got a kick out of him the other day. He was in here and he had one suspender on his trousers. He had lost half of it. He had one that came criss-cross across.

Reading in the Canyon

I ran into him once up at Provo Canyon at Vivian Park. I was over by the railroad tracks and here comes Brother Nibley walking down the railroad tracks reading a book. He was walking on the cross ties. He had his pant legs tucked into his stockings so they wouldn't get dusty as he walked along. I stopped and I said, "What are you doing Brother Nibley?" He said "Oh this is how I get my relaxation. I like to read a book walking down the canyon like this on the railroad track. This is where I get some relaxing reading."

Humility

Nibley was an independent type. He was probably the first hippy. He liked to show people that money and prestige and things were not important. I think he purposely has kept in a humble situation in order to look and appear that way. He kind of resents a show of wealth or uppity displays like this. He has always lived in a very humble home. He dresses very plain. I think he has become a hero for a lot of reasons here. People recognize his great intelligence; he speaks many languages. He's brilliant, considered by most people that we talk to here as the most brilliant man in the church.

Graduation Prayer

You've probably heard the story about when he told the prayer at graduation exercises. I asked him about that in here one day and he laughed and said, "That was probably the best thing I've ever done because they've never asked me to pray again." He has a real wit and a sense of humor.

Barbershop Questions

He answers questions for you, anything you want to ask him. We always have little questions about symbolisms and so forth that you see and he will explain it to you in a kindly but then say, "But what do I know about it."

Sunday School Teacher

He's still teaching Sunday School. My daughter talked about how the Sunday School class was held in the recreation hall. The ward only had about three hundred people in it but there was three hundred people who came to the Sunday School class. They came from all over the state. They came from Salt Lake. The bishop of the ward says it does present some problems but he believed it was worthwhile if people wanted to go that effort.

Kressimer

I've always been intrigued by the fact that he taught the gospel to and baptized Kressimer Cosic. Kressimer was an All-American basketball player here at BYU and he was recruited from the Yugoslavia Olympic team. He come into BYU not speaking any English. He was an atheist/communist. Through a kind of a quirk situation, Kressimer was living with another Yugoslavian who was already here. He was a tennis player named Zee Menchek. Zee got engaged to Nibley's daughter.

Brother Nibley said "Zee, I really feel an obligation to teach you about our church. The church is important in our family. I would certainly want to do my best to try and influence you to join the church. Would you be willing to take the discussions from me?"

He said, "Sure." He brings Kressimer with him the first night and on the very first discussion Kressimer was touched by the spirit. He wondered what this great feeling in his chest was.

He said, "I want to be baptized." He was just beside himself to be baptized. Brother Nibley made him take all of the discussions first. Then he baptized him.

[Nibley] says, "I'll share something with you about going up that day. Kressimer wanted to be baptized in the Tabernacle. We went into the baptismal area that morning. When we walked in the door where you get the clothing there was three women behind the counter who distributed the clothing.

They began screaming and raising their hands and oohing and ahing and they said, 'We can't believe it; we can't believe it!'

And we said, 'What is the matter?'

'Well, yesterday our supervisor said to us, 'I've been evaluating the clothing and we don't have anything for a person seven feet tall or somebody real large. I want something in there. Let's complete our inventory here.'

'Just yesterday we put together an outfit for somebody this man's size.'"

I said to Hugh, "Do you think that was inspiration or just plain luck?" He said, "You decide."

Kressimer died of cancer just this past summer at age forty-six. He remained very, very faithful in the Church. He was a Branch President twice in Yugoslavia and a District President once. At the time of his death he was Deputy Ambassador to Croatia

from the US. Kressimer, while he was dying in Bethesda Hospital in Maryland, Hugh Nibley and his wife flew back and met with him the day before he died. It was a very close relationship. Here was the great athlete and the great intellect who had come together and become some of the greatest friends. I think that was probably Kressimer's greatest friend. So he had that ability to mingle not just with the intellectual but with the athlete or whoever.

When he was in here not too long ago I asked him about the baptism. I said, "How did a guy your size ever baptize a guy who is almost seven feet tall? What was it like in the font?"

He says, "It was really a task. But I got him down and I got him up."

Class on TV

We talk about "We saw you on TV." And he says, "You know, I've never watched that. How was it?" He's kind of an unassuming guy who has done so many great things.

Last Book

He was talking about a book he was writing. I got this second-hand--he was talking to Kyle. Kyle says, "You've been working on that book a long time, haven't you?" He says, "And I'm going to work on it a lot longer." He says, "How come?" And he says, "I've got the definite impression that Lord wants me to finish this book before I die. If I don't finish it for a long time, I'm going to live a long time." He says, "I don't want to finish it!" He's getting about eighty-eight or so.

G. Eugene England 3/25/96

Born July 22, 1933

Background

England is a professor in the English Department at BYU. He specializes in teaching Shakespeare and LDS literature. Every spring term he is in charge of the Theater in London Study Abroad program. He admires Nibley and has been aware of him since he came to teach at BYU.

Grabbing Notes From Box

This must have been in the fall of 1967. We had started *Dialogue* and Brother Nibley had given us an essay to publish. I had never met him but he came to the Palo Alto Stake to speak in the Know Your Religion series so I went to hear him and went up to introduce myself before. The place was chuck full of people all the way back through the Cultural Hall. We were talking briefly before and getting acquainted. It came time for him to start and I noticed that he had two long [shoe] boxes full of cards down at the side of him and when it came time for him to begin his lecture he simply reached down without looking (as far as I could tell), took out a huge stack of cards, walked up the front and began speaking from the top card. It was when he was doing his initial main work on the book of Abraham and using sources which had become available since Joseph Smith to show that the Book of Abraham contains materials that were unavailable to Joseph Smith. It was all in other languages and esoteric stuff. And the amusing thing was to look around me and here were wonderful old ladies in blue hair and tennis shoes and all the stereotypes and they were scribbling notes like mad and they probably didn't understand a word he was saying but they knew it was all wonderful because it was proving the church is true.

Blacks and Priesthood

One of the most amazing thing is that all through his lecture Nibley was discussing a passage in the Book of Abraham about the priesthood being denied to certain people and it was right in the middle of the furor at Stanford where they were threatening to cut off athletic relations with BYU and there was a lot of criticism so there was a lot of interest and (the audiences') ears were all perked up. And using the other materials that he had found and related to these issues he went through and said, "It's clear that this passage in the Abrahamic materials has nothing to do with the priesthood as we know it. It's entirely irrelevant to the question of priesthood. It was a matter of usurping authority." And he just went on! I realized, I think a lot of people did, that he had simply wiped away the whole rationale that people had been using for why blacks were being denied, but he didn't even make the connection. There's a passage that talks about certain people being denied the priesthood. People assumed, "Well, it was because they were black, they were Canaanites." But he says, "It has nothing to do with the curse of Cain. It's really because they usurped authority, not because they were black." They were using the passage to make it doctrinal when of course it was just a policy. I still don't know how conscious it was but it was so revealing. I think the reason that he hasn't been a

controversial figure, though he does extremely controversial things and reveals extremely controversial material, is that he doesn't call attention to it. He just went on. It was all part of this wonderful Proving the Gospel was True and we were all scribbling notes, but the fact was overlooked that he had just wiped away a rationale that even some General Authorities had used. Joseph Fielding Smith for instance. I've seen him do that on other occasions, talk about very controversial materials but not call attention to the relevance to modern issues even though if you think about it, it's very relevant.

Social Prophet

He's a prophet but he's been cursed by people not believing him on the social issues that he cares most about. His book *Since Cumorah* is seen as this great evidence of the historicity of the Book of Mormon, which I think it is, but as he himself says in the book, that doesn't matter. What matters is the message and the whole second part of his book is about the lessons for modern people but nobody takes that seriously. He's never been taken very seriously in the church generally as a social prophet though I think that's exactly what he is. The things he cares most about he hasn't so far had much influence on the church. I think *Approaching Zion* will become a classic, and I hope it will influence subsequent generations, but my feeling now is that in the church very few people see him as the social prophet that he is. He's more interested in the Book of Mormon being an inspiring book than an inspired one. He takes that for granted and I think he's right. The issue is what it has to say to us today about how to live. I think he has expressed that better than anyone. Maybe if he had been understood he'd have been in trouble. But on the other hand, by staying out of trouble, he hasn't had much influence. It's hard to gauge.

Defender of the Faith

He's such a hero because he's a defender of the faith. And a very able one. Very bright, a genius. It's true. He's given us our best resources. Some others are now following through but he's done it. We want and need apologists and he's been the great one. A model for us all. I sense as I talk to him that there is probably a little disappointment that what he cared most about hasn't been taken seriously. And he says it. At the end of his wonderful video tape that's what he says, "What do you learn from all of this? All that matters is to repent and forgive." It's kind of sad in a way. I think that *is* what's most important but that's not what people focus on. That's the only time I've ever seen him weep, when he says that on the video.

Gary Gillum 8/3/95

Religion, Philosophy and Ancient Studies Librarian

Born in 1944 in Indianapolis, Indiana

Background

My first exposure to Nibley was the January 1969 issue of *The Improvement Era*, in which there was an article by him called "The Unknown Abraham." Before that time one of my criticisms of the Mormon church was that it didn't really have much of an intellectual or scholarly basis. Everything revolved more or less around Joseph Smith and folklore, if you will. But when I sat down and read the Nibley article, I thought, "This guy's a genius! I've got to meet him someday. He's got a lot to say. He's saying some things here that most biblical scholars won't touch with a ten-foot pole-- and he's not afraid to say it." So that really impressed me as I investigated the Church. Harking back to Nibley and his writings always helped me with my testimony, and when I came to work at BYU I took a class from him, and finally met him.

Language

He's not self-effacing: just very honest about his abilities. Languages, for instance: it's one thing to be perfectly fluent in German so that you both speak and read everything in German. He can go over there to Germany and get along fine. Nibley could probably claim knowledge of over twenty languages, but that's not to say he knows them as fluently as he does German. One of the signs of good scholar in Ancient Studies is that he can maybe sit down for a couple of hours and get the basic feeling about a language and the research he is doing. Nibley has done this to a great extent. He can learn a language in half a semester, or at least I've heard that he can. He's motivated and excited to do it because it helps him to the original thought of the author, not what the translators interpret. So this is one of the things about his scholarship you can't find fault with: he uses all original sources.

No Standing Ovation

Nibley's wife and my wife both play in the Utah Valley Symphony. She plays the cello, and my wife plays the violin. I'm there for the concerts just like Bro. Nibley, so I see him outside of his research in the Ancient Studies Library. In a concert situation in the tabernacle, if he doesn't like something, he's not going to join in with the standing ovation like everybody else--unless he really enjoys the music. In some cases I have noticed that he won't even applaud. A couple of times I've asked him how he liked such and such a concert. And he's very frank about it. He says, "That was pretty lousy," or "This was just wonderful." He knows classical music well. A lot of people don't realize that he knows music well enough to sit down at the piano and play.

Impatient with Mediocrity

One of the things that I've discovered since I've come out here to Happy Valley (or what missionaries told me was Zion) is that it doesn't matter how poorly a person performs a number in Sacrament Meeting, for example: we're always full of praise for him.

Consequently, the level of our music in the church is rather lower than it should be. There have been a few people like Brother Tullidge in the early days of the Church here in Utah who were more critical. He would frankly tell people when they made mistakes. He'd say, "I'm telling you this so you'll do better the next time." That way we increase the level of our musical abilities and not have mediocrity as the standard. Nibley doesn't pull any bones about *anything*, not just music. If he doesn't like something, he'll say that it's kitsch. He's not going to care who cares about his criticism. It's just art. When he sees real art he will say something like: "This is real art." Then he will try to teach you what real art is. What real music is. Or who a good signer is. He's on top of that stuff.

He's not patient with mediocrity of any kind, whether it's scholarship or any other thing. He used to be pretty bad at footnotes. But that's because he feels like he has to include them to make certain scholars happy. (It's not making him happy, however.) He's got such a strong testimony of the gospel that he doesn't need to "convince" people with footnotes. He can do it with his own words.

Car Left at Store

His wife sent him to the store once. Apparently he drove the car instead of waling like he usually does. Sometime later he came back carrying the groceries, and his wife said, "I thought you'd taken the car. What did you do with the car?" And he could not remember where he'd put the car. It's simply his way of looking at things: his mind and spirit are preoccupied with other things than the mundane or trivial. This is the Einstein Syndrome. Einstein hardly ever matched his socks. That wasn't important to him. And Nibley, he will wear tennis shoes from K-mart with a black suit and his fishing hat. He seems to wear clothes to cover his body. He's not worried about fashion or that kind of thing.

Escaped Death in War

I see Nibley many times doing research in the Ancient Studies Library or in his office. I usually won't disturb him because of his deep involvement. But one day I asked him about his experience at D-Day on the beaches of France during World War Two. He was in a mood to talk and got more animated than I usually see him. His boss, a colonel or a general in the intelligence, was going to land in France in one of the many gliders that were being towed there and released. Nibley was originally ordered to accompany him, but at the last moment the commander changed his mind. He ordered Nibley to come in one of the LST's (a ship that would land him on the beach). So that the important files could be brought over. He was given a jeep and his trusty type writer, as he called it. Then Nibley says, "Here I was floating along across the English Channel and when I got to the beach I really put the pedal to the floor and got off the beach area as soon as I could because there were bullets buzzing all around." Obviously Nibley got through because he's still here. He concluded, "It was a very providential thing for my commander to tell me to do that, because the glider that he was in crashed into some trees when they were trying to land in a field--and he was killed. And everybody else in the glider too."

NDE

One day I asked him about his NDE. I had been wondering about why he had such an ascantological (concerned about the last things) view on life and where he got it from. He said, "Oh, it's just because of my ancestor's connection with Joseph Smith." Well I came away not quite believing him. When the video "Faith of an Observer" came out with his wife talking about her husband's NDE, I thought, "Aha! *That's* where it came from." So one I asked Brother Nibley about it again and got some more details. He said that he was clinically dead and he came back. It's interesting to me that he's had so many wonderful experiences in his life, but to my knowledge, he hasn't kept a journal or anything.

Background

I tell these stories to illustrate Nibley's well-placed priorities. There are people both on and off campus who don't put much credence in Nibley because they don't like his manner of scholarship, which often includes the workings of the spirit. If any of these people ever criticized him to my face, my response would be something like this: "Yes, and the scholars of Joseph Smith's day didn't agree with *his* scholarship either." Nibley is a unique individual and a genius. He doesn't do things in the manner of the 1990's. Nibley helps us to see some viewpoints that most of us overlook. We often have mixed-up priorities, or we are involved too much in the latest fashions, television, or watching R-rated movies.

Manner of Teaching

Some people even criticize his manner of teaching. When I took his class, he'd come out of his office talking about what he was doing his research on. He wouldn't follow much of a syllabus. But that was an exciting thing! You were learning how his mind operated. And you caught his enthusiasm. Sometimes that is more important than following a syllabus. I would rather that students be excited about the Book of Mormon and learn some tools for how to study it.

Temple Ceremony Change

Nibley has added a lot to the Church, and the General Authorities have not criticized him--because he does his homework. He has met with the Brethren several times and has been influential in some of the changes made in the temple ceremonies. He didn't care for some of the changes that were made, but he didn't criticize the Brethren. Yet when they ask him for his opinion, he gives it.

Gary L. Hatch 10/3/94

Born in 1964 in Salt Lake City, UT

Background

Hatch is the co-director of the Composition program at BYU. He received his Bachelor's Degree from BYU and his Ph.D. from Arizona State University. He is one of the editors of the recently published *The Way, The Truth and the Life* by B.H. Roberts, Hatch's great-grandfather. Hatch learned many of his stories about Nibley from a friend, Nibley's daughter Zina.

Intelligence Officer

This is a story I heard from Zina. And this is how I remember it. Hugh Nibley was an intelligence officer during World War II. And I've heard that even before the war broke out, even before Pearl Harbor was bombed and the U.S. declared war on Japan, he saw the war coming and had already started gathering information on the war in Europe as a way of preparing himself. He was ready to be an intelligence officer when he was needed. He was part of the Normandy invasion. He landed on, I think it was Utah beach, or Omaha, one of the two. He was part of the Normandy invasion but the story I heard must have happened before Normandy. Partly it's just to demonstrate his great skill at language and his tremendous intellect and memory. He was a missionary in Germany, either Germany or Austria. Anyway, a German-speaking mission before the war and he spoke German so well that no one even questioned if he was American or not. No one ever thought he was not a native. And I think, as I recall, he was in Turkey and he had obtained some information or some intelligence or something that was quite extensive--several pages and I guess it was in German. It must have been German. As he came to leave Turkey there was a check point at the border. And they were just I guess checking people's papers. So he memorized all of this stuff from the...that he had gathered and then destroyed the originals and passed the checkpoint just fine because of his tremendous skill with language. Then when he got to London, or got to the Allies, he repeated word for word what he had memorized and what he had obtained as intelligence.

When I have told that before it is just to show the tremendous power of, sort of the native intelligence of Hugh Nibley and the ability that he had with memory. Maybe to inspire students to learn to develop their own memories or learn languages themselves or maybe to see him as a heroic figure. You know someone they could emulate or admire. Usually the stories I hear about him are portraying him as a heroic figure. Just so that I guess people can have people to admire and idolize.

Learning Arabic

Apparently he learned Arabic by driving around these kids who spoke Arabic and he picked up Arabic from them.

Russian Class

Then there's a story that he was accidentally listed to teach a Russian course one semester so he went and learned Russian to teach this course. He was disappointed when they wouldn't let him teach it.

Memorization

One of my interests is language, not just in rhetoric but I enjoy learning foreign languages myself. I've always admired his ability to learn foreign languages. He can speak very well and read languages that no one else can. Zina told me he probably reads upwards of about 30 languages--some of which no one reads anymore like Coptic. And that he reads and speaks, or at least understands, every European language. I wish I could ask her now if that included Danish and Scandinavian languages because that is what I learned on my mission and it is very rare that someone who hasn't been a Scandinavian missionary knows the Scandinavian language. The reason I've held on to them [these stories] is because of my own interest.

Reading and Driving

Apparently when he went to UCLA he would either read books or do his flip cards as he was driving to and from school. Of course he drove a lot slower. People drove a lot slower then. It was like a Model A. It probably went 15 or 20 miles an hour.

Flip Cards

You see him on campus and oft times he'll have flip cards. What he's doing, I think, is he's memorizing things. In fact I have my own set of flip cards that I use and I learned to do it on my mission. The story about the flip cards that we used in the Danish mission was that the system was used by Nibley or developed by Nibley. They gave us a system. They called it the black box system because index cards in Denmark come, the holders are all black. And it was a system for systematic review of language and scriptures and just anything that you want to memorize. I still use it. I've used it for 10 years. It was introduced for helping you to learn Danish language and to memorize scriptures and grammar rules. So you'd write on the card a scripture you wanted to learn. Then you'd write the day and the date that you made the card. Then you'd write the numbers 1-8 at the top of the card, 1-4 and 1-12. The file was divided up with three sections. One tab said daily. There was a tab for each day of the week and one for each day of the month. What you'd do is memorize the card and then put it in the daily part and then you'd pull it out every day review for seven more days, marking off the 1-8. Then you'd, if it was made on Tuesday you'd put it in the Tuesday section. Then on every Tuesday you'd pull it out and review it and mark off the 1-4. Then if it was made on the 30th you'd put it in the 30 tab and on the 30th of the month you'd pull it out. I used to memorize about 20-30 words a day in Danish. The reason I'm telling you this is because when it was presented to us, one story circulating around the mission was that this system was invented by Nibley. I don't know if it was or not but they tie it to him because of his phenomenal ability with language and with memory. As "Wow, this is the system Hugh used to learn all those languages." But then you do see him with flip cards so maybe that's where it

comes from too because when he's going across campus or almost every time I've seen him he's carrying those cards. And I've often wondered if he is reviewing things using this system that he supposedly invented. The idea is that if you review something every day for a week and then every week for a month and then every month for a year by the time the month's over you'll either know it or you won't care about it anymore.

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel 3/21/96

Born in 1954 in Blackfoot, ID

Background

As a missionary was given a *Since Comurah* book and consumed it; it changed his whole world and then signed up for Nibley classes at BYU. Holzapfel is a member of the religion department faculty. He has taken many classes from Nibley and has been a great admirer of him for years.

Last Minute Test

Nibley used to give this Pearl of Great Price class. It was notorious. A lot of times there were students who were interested in Ancient History and languages--they were getting degrees or whatever. So there was a core group of us (Prof. Dave Seely, etc.). At the end of the semester he would ask you to write a paper. You would write your paper and then he would give you a grade for the class. Sometimes he would even ask, "What do you think you deserve in the class?" This went on for two or three years. I was engaged and my fiancée was taking Ancient Greek and she was studying classics. I told her, "You should really take this class!" She said, "Eh, I don't want to take it for credit." But I said, "Nah, you'd just as well. If you're going to sit in there every day you'd just as well take it for credit. It's a breeze you know. At the end of the semester you write your paper and that's it. It's great." So she takes the class, we go through the whole semester. He comes in the week before finals and says "This semester I've decided to do things differently. I'm going to give an exam." Of course my fiancée hits me really hard. And we're like going Wow, we can't believe this. And he says, "This is going to be an unusual exam. No one will be able to get all the questions right. What I want to do here is to see the smartest person in this class and what they can do.

So exam time comes and I looked at the exam, I was just sitting in the class because I'd already taken it for credit. And they were like the word "Mahan" with ABCD and he would spell it just slightly different. You had to answer the question and there was the answer but you had to make sure the spelling was . . . I mean this was an intricate exam. And she ended up getting a C on the class and of course wrecked her GPA. We were totally unprepared for this thing, I mean it was a massive exam. I even have a copy and from time to time I've given it out as an exam in my own classes to tease people. They're all, "What are you talking about?!" So I say, "That's not the real exam."

You're always surprised [with Nibley]. Predictability is impossible. And where Nibley, year after year after year he did this. Boom. Out of the blue he decides to do something totally different. It had incredible consequences for my fiancé. The other thing was, he announced that on this exam, *nobody* could get all the questions right. Of course with Pearl of Great Price he would go in and out of languages. He might be doing Aramaic one second read some quote from some Greek text next.

Nibley the Prophet

In the old Joseph Smith building and there was a classroom in there that had these high windows so lots of sun came in. It was one of my early Nibley classes. There was this core of students who were all going to go off to graduate school and do something in ancient languages or history or whatever. We were in this class and he was talking about the last days and the signs of the times and it was just one of those days when the sun was coming in the room just right so he kind of looked like a prophet. This was really great stuff. We were young and enthusiastic and here was our prophet speaking to us. All of a sudden he stopped and he walked over to the window and he gazed out. Realistically it was just a minute or two but it felt like an hour. He didn't say anything, he just gazed out the window. Then he turned around to us and he said, "It's too late." And that was it. The class was over. He left. So we're all like "No! What! The Second Coming's tomorrow?!" We all walked out with this really weird feeling it was eerie and wow. Nibley was this prophet.

That's one that we often reflect on with each other. "Remember that day!" That was really weird. The lighting was just right. He was obviously contemplating something. We have no idea what happened. He could have been saying it was too late--to turn his taxes in. I don't know. He walked out of class. That was it. There was no discussion. I use the word eerie but there was something other worldly about him. He's really kind of a very interesting, non-regular person who walks around this campus totally in a different world.

Continuation of Lectures

My wife and I got married and we found an apartment close to campus. Unbeknownst to us it was in Nibley's ward. We honestly had no idea where he lived or anything. We just got this home. So we show up to church and I was blown away when they announced that in the new year there were several Gospel Doctrine classes and they went through the teachers and they said Hugh Nibley. My wife and I went WOW. So immediately we went into his class. This was the most incredible experience. We went to class the first Sunday. We listened to the class. I had been taking a class all winter, got married during spring break, came back (this was spring) and what we discovered was, one of the things about Nibley is sometimes you would lose, I mean he would start class and it was like "Wait a second. What is he talking about?" There were these breaks. What we discovered, this is the honest to goodness truth, he continued discussion from class during the week in Gospel Doctrine. Then when he came to class on Monday, he picked up from Gospel Doctrine. So all of a sudden we went through this spring term and we realized Nibley had been talking all week and he just kept talking. It didn't matter where he was. He just kept talking the same thing. I think it happened to be Book of Mormon that year. But we figured out that's what was going on. So now being in his class, Oh, now it all made sense. So he had this stream of consciousness that went the whole semester. It was really bizarre. When I had other people around tell me "Ah, sometimes I just get lost" I told them, "Don't worry. You have to go to Sunday School class and catch the break in the middle."

Egyptian Hieroglyphics

My wife and his wife became visiting teaching companions. Phyllis. As a result Jenny kind of got to know them and their little family circle. And Phyllis invited us over for Family Home Evening one night. Of course we immediately took her up. Yeah this is great! So we went over. The kids were still fairly little. They were still in junior high or high school. They were having this little incredible Family Home Evening discussion back and forth and we were scared to say anything because it was a level beyond us. After the official discussion was over we were kind of teasing maybe Zina and I said “You’re pretty provocative and precocious.” I was giving her a compliment. And Phyllis told this story. She said, “Yeah, my daughter’s always been that way. The first year she went to school the teacher said, ‘How many of you can write your name on your paper?’ The kids raise there hand so they were supposed to write it on this piece of paper and turn it in. Then the teacher got up and said, ‘OK, who did the drawings here?’ So the Nibley girl raised her hand and said, ‘That’s mine.’ ‘Come on, I thought you said you could write your name.’ ‘That’s Egyptian hieroglyphics.’ ‘Come on, what’s your name. . . Nibley? Oh, OK.’”

Apparently she had learned to write her name in hieroglyphics and the first day of school...They’re pretty bizarre kids.

No Rest in San Fran

He’s kind of famous for his intellectual ability, languages and stuff. Charles was living in San Francisco. And he’d come back to go on a mission. He gave his farewell talk in the ward here in Provo instead of his home ward in San Francisco. There was a little get together afterwards. Because we kind of had established this semi-attitude of being over there almost on a weekly basis for Family Home Evening by this time. We asked Charles about his dad and stuff. Charles told us that when the Nibley’s had flown over to take him through the temple to get his temple ordinances, that the night before his father had been up all night long, just kind of walking around the house. The next morning Charles said, “Dad, are you sick? Are you not feeling well?” And his dad’s response was, “No, there’s just so much evil in this city I couldn’t rest.”

The reason I tell this story is that Charles said, “People will remember my dad as an intellectual but actually he’s a very spiritual man.” This story shows us the other side of Nibley, the spiritual thing.

Picking Berries

I was coming up on the campus and Nibley was in the bushes eating berries or something. If I would have gone in there I would have died, right? I mean he knew what berries to eat. He was actually harvesting coming up campus eating, on Maeser Hill. I came up on campus and there he was. I had gotten to know him by this time so I was unafraid. I went up and asked him, “What’s going on? What are you up to?” He was staring up past the temple. He says, “Oh, look up there. Look at Rock Canyon. Look at that wall right there. See that?” I looked up there, “Oh yeah, yeah. I kind of see that.”

He goes, "I've never noticed that before." He just was staring. He'd been up there harvesting then all of a sudden he was standing up there looking at this thing. And I thought, how many times has he gone up this hill and yet it was like a new thing for him. And when I read that Hafen thing I was so interested that obviously this was a common, sharing type of thing. It must happen all the time. I just captured one moment in Nibley's life. Obviously lots of people did. I remember that day how students were busily coming up on campus, bikes and walking. And he was totally oblivious to everyone coming by. He was just doing his deal. It's really other-worldly. Some people might say eccentric.

Coat Collection

I heard from the bishop of our Provo ward (in 78 or 79). By the time we had lived there about a year the bishop obviously knew my connection, that I was interested in Nibley and that I was taking Hebrew and took Egyptian from Nibley that year. A bunch of stuff. He told me a very interesting story: we had a fairly active High Priest's Quorum. Dallin Oaks, president of the university, was in the ward. It was an interesting ward. The bishop said "We decided that we were going to raise some money to buy an older member of our ward a coat. He didn't have a nice warm coat. It was winter. So we got the High Priest's Quorum to collect money to actually buy this person a coat. And Nibley came into my office and he said, 'Hey, I'll give you \$100 to help this guy.' And I looked at him and said, 'Hugh, that coat's for you.'

He claims that Nibley came into him. I pinned him down on it.

Baby Blessing

His mother came up to Salt Lake to visit and in the temple, the church patriarch gave her a blessing. She was pregnant at the time. The impact was basically that the patriarch gave her a blessing and said that she would have a son. That it would be a very special son. As a result of that [he didn't] have to do dishes. He had tutors. His mom took this seriously and from when he was born, he was educated and taken care of and reproached.

World War Two Visions

He had had a dream. He called them his Five A.M.ers. His visions he'd have at 5 A.M. in the morning. He was swimming. It was obviously a pacific island. Warm water. All of a sudden he could hear these bombs and destruction. All of a sudden he found himself next to this ship and it was sinking. As he swam around it he saw. U.S.S. A.R.I.Z.O.N.A. on it. It was some time before World War II broke out.

Falkland Islands

He had woke up in the middle of the night and had one of these visions about destruction and found a map, a globe or a flat map or whatever. He said, "I couldn't figure out what the hell anyone would be interested in South America." He went ahead and he looked and he found what he thought and it was called the Falkland Islands. Shortly thereafter there was a major battle between Argentina and Britain in the Falkland Islands. So, he

kind of had these premonitions.

Battle of the Bulge

I always heard that Nibley foresaw the Battle of the Bulge. Sure enough he tells this story how he'd been telling them there was going to be this counter attack that nobody believed him. Then all of a sudden that night the German armies come rushing through the thing, the local commander "Get Hugh Nibley up here. I want him up here right now." Because now they took him seriously. He had had advance warning. Very prophetic.

Of course this added to the experience that one day in the classroom in the Joseph Smith Building. Seeing him in this new light. Then Charles' comment that his dad has always been more spiritual than intellectual. So Nibley has always been kind of a modern prophet. Now as I got through graduate school, in a certain sense when I focus now on isn't so much his historical writing as it is his social commentary. For me it's Nibley got us interested in it all and it's on his shoulders we stand, because of all his work, but I think most of us aren't as interested in that as much as his social commentary, his books like *Approaches to Zion* where he is talking about social issues and where we should stand as a church and as individuals, his criticism of current society, Mormon society, Utah society, American society. It's turned out to be that kind of thing rather than an intellectual.

Doxey

I had organized a thing in Mission Viejo Stake. I invited Arthur Henry King and Hugh Nibley to this seminar. Somebody in that local stake invited Roy Doxey. I wasn't too happy about the arrangement because they had totally different approaches to things. I organized this thing and we had this symposium and Arthur Henry King gave his talk and Nibley gave his talk and Roy Doxey came up as the third speaker and in front of the whole audience said, "Now you're going to hear the true gospel." It was like really tense. It was like, "I can't believe he did this." It was kind of what I had predicted. But Nibley and King just shrugged it off and didn't think anything about it. Doxey went on to do his spiel, talking about where they had made mistakes. Basically he had just a different approach to the gospel and like water off a duck's back, they just went on and did their deal.

I often tell that to say, "You've just got to be true to yourself." Nibley didn't stop going to church the next week. He just kept going.

FARMS

Guys like Truman Madsen in the early days were guys who believed Nibley but they wanted to make Nibley palatable to the wealthy members of the church, to get the resources to do what they want to do. In fact, when *Timely and Timeless* came out Nibley was furious because Madsen and those guys had literally, physically changed it. He handed to me the original manuscript. He said, "Richard, go through and find the

changes.” In my book he wrote, “I won’t sign it. It’s not my book. They changed it, added to it. They didn’t consult me about it. I will initial it though, for you. April 1978. Bro Holzapfel, Handle with caution, Hugh Nibley.” I went though and I identified all the changes. There are little comments that he had made that they had taken out. Madsen at this time was trying to get some of the wealthier members to donate to push this agenda, to make Nibley palatable. This was that critical transition. And by now, it has been made. Nibley has allowed them to do it. Or they’ve done it and Nibley sees the benefit because FARMS has grown so big or whatever but those were the heady days, when he was taking on people.

He writes pretty tough stuff (about attorneys for instance). What if it offends people who are donating big bucks to the Law School? Stuff like (the things that were taken out of *Timely* gets published and some rich attorney in California writes this letter to BYU saying, “Hey I’m donating to you guys \$100,000 what are you doing publishing this kind of stuff?” There are some really deep feelings. Seriously deep feelings. There’s tension.

Famous Graduation Prayer

I’ve heard it in Europe, I’ve heard it on the east coast, I’ve heard it in California. That one has taken a life of its own.

It’s the context of Nibley taking on the church. That he has gotten to a position where he is so dedicated to the kingdom that the brethren don’t question him. And as a result that gives him the freedom to say things that if I said it, I’d be excommunicated. And he is able to do that. It’s kind of like there is nobody alive who can basically say exactly what he feels about how the church operates. I think we tell the story because we wish we could do it. And here’s our spokesman who can do it so we use Nibley to do our own agenda but under the protection, under the umbrella, under the safety, “Well, *Nibley* said this.” I’m not saying it’s bogus that we’re sitting up here giving Margaret Thatcher a degree. But look what Nibley says. He calls it as it is. It’s really my feelings but I’m using Nibley as my voice.

The storytelling of the famous prayer is a vehicle for people to talk about their own personal frustrations and they use Nibley as the way to do it.

Politics

He changed me from being a Republican to a Democrat. He had that kind of impact on me. Omar Kadar was a young Palestinian who was converted to Mormonism. Nibley had a big influence on him. He was a professor of Political Science here. He was a big Democrat in Utah County. He used to take a class on Monday nights called Current Affairs. It was repeatable. So you could take it over and over. He’d have Nibley come, Bob Redford came, he just had tons of people coming to that class. Terrorist from Nicaragua with heads covered telling about being terrorists. Ted Wilson, running to be the mayor of Salt Lake would come. It was not uncommon to see Bob Redford, Hugh Nibley in the middle and the political candidate on the right. I remember vividly

Redford, Nibley in his regular, clothes from the DI, whatever he was wearing, and the political candidate they were endorsing. Hatch came, there were lots of people coming through. Nibley had that kind of impact to change people to start thinking about certain issues in ways that they hadn't thought about.

Gypsies

He would meet these gypsies who were descendants of Tubal Cane. My car was crashed down at the old house. They asked for some bread and fruit and stuff and they said they would fix my car. About an hour later I went outside and you couldn't even see that the car had ever even been hit. They'd been out there with their boards and they'd fixed it perfectly. These gypsies were workers of metal.

Reading Icelandic

One day I went into Nibley's library. In the back he had a garage and a library. We went back there and he showed us all these books. I picked up one and said, "Hey what's this?" He said, "Oh, that's Icelandic." "You read Icelandic?" "Yeah, I wanted to read, *Eric the Red* so I figured I'd better read it in the original." He learned Icelandic so that he could read a book.

Esoteric

Besides the idea that he can critique BYU administration, BYU policy, in certain ways, also for our contacts outside the church he is kind of an esoteric Mormon who is playing loose and fast with the sources, kind of an eccentric, Medieval monk. But on the social issues when people think we (Mormons at BYU) are too conservative, you can give them a piece and there is an appreciation that maybe BYU can't be stereo-typed exactly how they want to do it. I've often used some of the social essays to give to non-Mormon professors and people I've worked with to let them know that there are other thoughts on campus. But I don't give out his academic work. Because he's esoteric, he's in another world.

Sources

Nibley is a million times smarter than I'll ever be. I couldn't even dialogue with the gentleman. He is beyond me. But if you use his stuff, you have to go check it--like you would with any other scholar. You go out to graduate school and some of the stuff you read of Nibley's that you had just sucked up, all of a sudden you realize there are other ways of reading that source. In one sense there is almost a disappointment. I suppose for many of us there is a moment of doubt when you find out you're not reading it the same way that Nibley is reading it. Well, a lot of people do that and that's just Nibley. But you've got to check the sources.

The classic example for me is when I was reading an essay. A series of articles had been published in the Ensign on Enoch, as I recall. And Nibley has this quote about revelation. (Brigham Young says) "I've had millions of them. I would have given them to the church if they wanted me to. I was doing some source checking and the context, at

least how I read it, was I have millions of *dollars*, I would have donated to the church if they had wanted me to. But Nibley had used it as if he had had millions of revelations. That probably is true. Brigham Young had many revelations.

There are a couple of things here: Nibley writes things on 3x5 cards. Over decade he has taken these notes. So maybe when he pulls back to use them, maybe his sources aren't as good. I think Don Norton said it best for me, "Nibley did so much, when he finally writes it down it is just impossible for him to regroup and recheck everything." In the old office there were thousands of boxes of these little 3x5 cards. There was just an amazing amount of stuff. He's using that kind of a system to regroup so that could be part of the problem.

Apologist

There was a period in Nibley's life when he did have doubts. Then he went through some experiences (like his NDE) where he became other worldly and then there were no issues anymore.

This was the first period where he was really having doubts. I think he referred to himself as atheist, but maybe just agnostic. Mathias F. Cowley had been a member of the Quorum of the Twelve but he had been disciplined so he was no longer an acting apostle, but still a member of the church. He was speaking in I think Glendale. As he was speaking he stopped. He looked down to Hugh and said, "You have a question. I don't know what the question is, I don't know what the answer is, I just know that you're going to get an answer." And that was an early experience of Nibley's where he felt like God knew him and was concerned. As a series of things happened to him, his world view changed to where God is God and Joseph Smith is a real prophet and those issues aren't debatable for him anymore. So in one sense he starts off knowing that it's true so the thing is, how can he present it the best way he can. That isn't to say that he's closed-minded because he is critical of certain things about our church and about things we believe and about how we act, he's willing to do that. But on a certain level, about whether the church is true or the gospel, is it really restored, the issue is closed. He knows. So the issue is closed. His job now is to figure out how to do it.

How I explain it to people who are a little bit critical is I say it's kind of like a scientist who has discovered something. He doesn't know exactly from step A-Z but he knows that he has discovered something. So now he has to go back and figure out how to do it. So the experiment in a certain sense is already over. So the issue now is how to explain it.

19th Century Mormon

I think Nibley is in a different dimension than most of us. I'm very secular. I've never seen anybody speak in tongues, I've never seen anybody raised from the dead. I've never seen an angel. I have spiritual feelings; I feel good when I do good things. I feel like God is in my life but Nibley is like a 19th Century Mormon. And I'm a 20th Century

Mormon.

Charles Nibley

He talks about coming up when he was a kid to visit his Grandfather Charles Nibley in what must have been the Hotel Utah. His grandfather told him that if an angel showed up in the room he would go jump out a window and commit suicide. He felt he had really been wrong. "I've raped the earth. I've really been wrong." For a young kid with his grandfather as a member of the First Presidency saying to him, "Business is bad and we've sold our soul. We've lost the spirit" that has to have had an impact. I think Nibley just shut it off. He's different than us.

Family

It's been hard on the family too. Sometimes they couldn't understand the sacrifices. Like in the early days when they had no money and gave everything away. I remember the first time I opened the refrigerator. It was being held by a piece of wood and it had nothing. An old broken down refrigerator with a piece of wood under there to hold it up. Jack Welch finally convinced Hugh to allow them to do some things so that Phyllis could survive after he died. I think Hugh finally allowed that to happen. But personally he has no interest. There's nobody else like him. He just doesn't care. He sees things totally different from us. His world is much more mystical.

Love/Hate Thing

There are people that hate him passionately, in the church, locally, at BYU. Sometimes it's jealousy. Some people just think he is dead wrong. There are people who wish he would shut up about contemporary issues because they're good Republican capitalists and they don't like what he has to say about those issues. Let's face it, you read some of his stuff, you often feel guilty. People who don't know him can misunderstand him. But people who know him personally usually love him.

Victor Ludlow 3/25/96

born in 1943 in Spanish Fork, UT

Background

Ludlow became aware of Nibley as an undergraduate student at BYU and was particularly interested in Nibley after he came back from his mission in 1964. Ludlow has focused in history and languages and has always been aware of him as a presence. He is a professor in the religion department.

Honor's Thesis on Abraham

When I was an undergraduate here for my senior year I was in the Honor's Program and if you want to graduate with high honors you need to do some kind of...

It helps to be aware of the kinds of resources that are available. You would think that Hugh Nibley who has been here at BYU all these years would know everything that is in the library but he doesn't. He is so busy with his writing and teaching and what other responsibilities he had at that time, young children at home and all of that. He's just not aware, this commentary, this critical work, has come into the library and that it might have some information that would be helpful to you. You need to see what is out there before you put things together.

Teacher of the Year

A few years later after I had joined the faculty we were over in the Marriott Center for one of the Tuesday assemblies towards the end of the semester where they announced the Professor of the Year. There were a number of us from the Religious Education department that had walked over there. Hugh Nibley was in the row right in front of me in those chair seats. They announced him as the recipient and asked him to come down and get his plaque. He is a very humble individual. He chuckled, "Teacher of the Year" he said. "I'm lucky if I have more than 12 students in my class at the end of the semester!" And that's true. He was notorious for it. You go by his class room the first day of the semester and it is packed with students sitting on the floor and standing in the aisles and the doors open and people standing out in the hallway because everybody wants to take his class. But by the end of the semester he's lucky if there are students past the first two rows. They just can't keep up with him. His vocabulary. You've got to have an excellent background in Ancient Near Eastern history and it helps if you know a few languages and he also uses literary connections. You have to be a very well-educated person to keep up with him. Otherwise he tosses out references, names and terms that just mean nothing to you. After a week or two of this you say, "Hey, I guess it would be impressive to sit at his feet but I'm in a constant cloud and a daze." There were very few students that would actually stick with him. He thought that was kind of humorous that he would be recognized as teacher of the year when he can't even keep students in his class. He might have 80 students in the beginning and he's lucky to have a fourth or a fifth that number at the end of class. I guess he was saying, "How can you be a great teacher if you can't keep the students there and satisfy their learning

demands?” But of course his learning opportunity is something that students wouldn’t be able to receive in a normal class.

Dan McKinley

Researcher at FARMS

born in 1948 in Salt Lake City, UT

Background

I've been an admirer of Hugh Nibley. It was because of his background and that of Truman Madsen that I chose to go back to Boston University School of Theology so that I could learn what people outside the church have to say about the gospel. I went on to the University of Virginia. One of the things that I noticed about Brother Nibley when I was reading his material and listening to tapes was that he stood out in contrast to a lot of the professors in the religion department because they were always quoting apostles. I've always been in favor of that and I've done it a lot myself. But he was quoting people like Aremeis and H. J. Cadbury, S.G.F. Brandon, all kinds of people outside of the church. But he was quoting them for the purpose of building up our understanding of the gospel. That's a methodology that I'd never seen before, at least not to the extent that he expressed. That encouraged me to go back and see what other people were saying and see if I could extrapolate their material into the gospel in a legitimate way. Or maybe disagree but at least I would have some information on what other people think. I believe that Brother Nibley has had an influence on other people too. They've gone back to school with the intention of doing some *Book of Mormon* research and we're seeing some fruits of that now. We might be entertained by the eccentricities that we see in the man but we're extremely grateful for what he's done. Because he's been kind of a role model, even the grand daddy. He's been the prototype of the finest in scholarship. He's the Dean of Mormon Historians.

Sprinkler

Brother Kuchar tells about the time that he almost ran into a sprinkling system while reading. He missed it because he *was* alert enough to be aware of what was ahead of him.

TP on Face

I've heard stories about how he'd be shaving and he'd come to work with a piece of toilet paper on the part where he had cut himself.

Slippers

He'd wear slippers or mismatched socks (to work).

Asleep

He'd be found by one of the custodians asleep in one of the restroom stalls. Sometimes I would think, "Does Sister Nibley wonder where her husband is?"

U OF U Asks for Linguist

This is something I heard from my father. In the 60's some professors from University of Utah wrote to Berkeley asking for the names of some really competent linguists. They

wrote back and said, “We would recommend someone in your own back yard, Hugh Nibley down at BYU.” I don’t know if the University of Utah was glad to hear that.

J. Golden as Genius

I think he’s the J. Golden Kimball of the present day. J. Golden was a legend in his own time but he wasn’t the towering genius. He just had sort of a Will Rogers-like humor and criticism. And he was a little prone to cuss. I think Brother Nibley has certain eccentricities that are endearing and people respond to those. A man of such intense . . . I remember reading a dialogue, a person outside of the church wrote a letter to the editor and said he considered Hugh Nibley to be one of four people born per century with his mental capacity. There are people even outside of the church who have recognized that he is a towering figure.

Missionary Questions

Ever since I was a deacon I knew of Hugh Nibley. We were in the same stake. He and my father Lynn McKinley and Truman Madsen at one time were talking to the missionaries from the Language Training Mission. They divided up on paper the questions from the missionaries. They decided who would deal with which subjects. I think my father dealt with doctrinal, Brother Madsen with philosophical and Brother Nibley with historical. Although there might have been some overlapping. That was quite an interesting experience for them, to work together.

Dirty Name

Between 1961 and 1962 in the Provo Tabernacle during a Stake Conference for his Provo Stake. There was a lull in the meeting. People were kind of wandering. Brother Nibley was up in the balcony. All of a sudden the Stake President stood up. He was known for asking people to come out of the audience to speak, just out of the blue. And he asked Brother Nibley to come down and to come to the pulpit and speak and Brother Nibley did. He was kind of direct in what he said. When he was finished President Christensen said, “He’s the only one I know who can call you a dirty name in fourteen different languages.”

I think that a lot of people stand in awe of the man. That is kind of a funny expression of that. Henry D. Mole, who was a counselor in the First Presidency at one time made a statement that he considered Hugh Nibley to have been the greatest linguist the church has ever had. This was published in the Church News. Given that fact of Brother Nibley’s tremendous ability to concentrate and think and read and to still be aware what is going on in the environment is amazing. And his ability to speak and do things on the spot.

Winder Blessing

When Sister Nibley was expecting him, she was having some difficulty with the pregnancy. She had a blessing from John R. Winder, the first counselor to Joseph F. Smith. In the blessing, President Winder expressed the idea that the pregnancy would

turn out alright and that the baby would be a son and that he would make a significant contribution to the church. After he was born he was named Hugh Winder Nibley.

Abraham in Egypt

Marvin Kuchar told me that he was in Egypt some time ago and they were in a place where there was an official bureaucratic office. And there was a leader of the office who was very busy seeing people and he was very demanding and there was only a certain amount of time that people could spend with him. He was a high profile person. He found out that they were Mormons and he said, "Oh, I know about your book." They thought he was referring to the Book of Mormon but he said, "No, I'm talking about *Abraham in Egypt* by Huge Nibley." He of course corrected the pronunciation and then said, "You know, he's going to be here in Egypt in a little while. Would you like to see him?" "Well sure but I don't know if he'd have time to see me or anything." As it turned out they made arrangements for him to come and talk to this man who was quite a high profile person. He completely canceled his appointments for that day to see Nibley. When they got together they had quite a chat and they talked about the Book of Mormon and about angels. Brother Kuchar pointed out that in Egypt and in other places in the Middle East, if you talk about angels they don't have problems with that like we do here in the west. They just accept it. They look at Nibley's book *Abraham in Egypt* as their book because it's about Abraham. And I'm sure he talked about the Book of Mormon too. But that is an opening that a man of Brother Nibley's stature was able to bring about in Egypt by bringing attention to people the church and the restoration of the gospel.

A Biography?

There was a time when I thought it would be impossible to write a biography of Hugh Nibley because I thought all he had done was spend time in libraries researching. But then I listened to him give talks that were video taped and then broadcast over KBYU. I also heard him say some things at FARMS functions. It dawned on me that this man has had a rich life. He hasn't just been dealing with books and writings. He has been with the Hopi's. The lady who was just about ready to stab him with a knife because she was so angry that he had prophesied that there would be problems in her area. This was over in Germany. She was thinking he was *responsible*.

Told to Address the Masses

Richard L. Evans told Nibley to address the tireless farmer in Kucherel. That is one thing that Nibley has never tried to do because he has wanted his audience to think and really stretch. In fact, when he was commissioned to write the lessons for the Melchizedek priesthood manual for 1957. The manual was on the Book of Mormon. He took the lessons to the reading committee and they rejected all the lessons. But David O. McKay who was the president of the church overruled their objections. They were uptight about this. They said, "We can't accept these lessons." President McKay said, "You jolly well can accept them. Let the brethren in the priesthood quorums reach." Suggesting let them extend their intelligence. Let them push and try to grow and not remain stagnant. The lessons did come through. In the opinion of some it is the greatest priesthood manual

we've ever had, with maybe the exception of B.H. Robert's lessons in theology for the 70's.

Even though he considered Richard L. Evans to be a great friend and admired him and they interchanged. The recommendation for him to lower his writings and speeches to a level of mediocrity Nibley never did accept. As a result, a lot of people have said that they can't grasp what he says. But those who do grasp on to what he is saying are really thrilled. They have noticed that he is on to something. In my opinion he has broken ground in several areas like the apostasy and particularly the early stages of gnosticism, and in The Pearl of Great Price, Abraham and Enoch material, The Book of Mormon.

Wife Tribute

Several years ago there was a display of wife's of BYU professors. They had Sister Covey and others and they had Sister Nibley there. With each picture of the wife there was a tribute by the husband. Brother Nibley had a very unusual tribute to his wife. His tribute was, "She knows when to leave me alone." At first I thought, "Well gee, that's hardly romantic!" There were all these neat things said by Steven Covey about his wife. But as I was talking to a good friend who was also a woman she said that she was quite impressed by that and as I thought about I thought Yes that is. He is a person who really needs to have privacy to get into his work. A friend of mine Matt Roper said that Nibley was asked one time, "If you could have the wish of your heart, what would it be?" His answer was, "To be invisible." Because people are constantly hounding him. He has an unlisted phone number but if people find out his number and they're watching one of his lectures [on TV] somewhere in Oregon or something they'll call him up and say, "What did you mean by that?!" I've tried to be sensitive to that by leaving him alone. I see him in his studies in the Ancient Studies room and I feel like he's working on something very important, leave him alone so that he can do his work.

Why Not Leadership?

I have a friend who said, "Leave him alone, don't tie him up with all of these frustrating responsibilities, so that he will be free to do his research because he is a unique individual." I heard at one time that he was in an Elder's Quorum Presidency but then I've heard him interviewed in 1974 where he said that he's never had a leadership position. One of the things that really strapped B.H. Roberts was that he was in his seventies and he had to attend to meetings that Brother Nibley doesn't have to worry about. I've always thought that it was an advantage that he was not in a Stake Presidency or something else. Brother Nibley's time is taken up with answering questions. The General Authorities ask him questions. People will ask them questions and they will send the questions down to Brother Nibley.

Don E. Norton

born 12/5/34 in Chinook, MT

Background

[Norton teaches technical writing and writing personal history at BYU.] I took a class from him in 1953 and 4 I think it was. He had a series of lectures on KSL *The World and the Prophets* and every Sunday night at 9 or 9:30 he read an essay for a half hour and I became very curious about him. So that fall I took a series of classes from him through the whole year. It was the early Christian Church, the Church Fathers and then the Antononsine Fathers or something like that. I just sat in there stunned. I had never met a mind like this. I think the main reason I was attracted to him was that he had answers to all of the questions I had and was not satisfied with getting. [laughs] But he's just dedicated. He's immensely stimulating. And he just satisfied my curiosity. Even before we became coming out with the complete works I think I had probably 90% of the original stuff he had published which I had collected....then I went on my mission and when I was on my mission his book called *The Approach to the Book of Mormon* was used as the Melchizedek Priesthood manual in 1957 I think. And I taught of that when I came home from my mission I taught from that manual. When I came to BYU I used to sit in on his classes. I tried to stay out of his way. He's a busy man. He's just a very stimulating man. He took a class from Nibley in 1954. Nibley had a series of lectures on KSL *The World and the Prophets* which was on the air every Sunday night where Nibley would read an essay for half an hour. This show raised Norton's curiosity about Nibley. That fall Norton took a series of classes from him through the whole year. "I just sat their stunned. I had never met a mind like this. I think the main reason I was attracted to him was that he had answers to all of the questions I had and was not satisfied with getting." Even before Nibley the complete works of Hugh Nibley came out, Norton had read over ninety percent of the original articles Nibley had published.

Rocks at Sign

He was traveling on his mission in a bus and he got off the bus and he was throwing rocks at a sign and couldn't hit it and would not get back on the bus until he hit it. He had this compulsion and passion in everything he did.

Rag-tag Coat

He was wearing this rag-tag overcoat in the mission field and the missionaries felt sorry for him so some of the missionaries, maybe even the Mission President, initiated a collection to buy him an overcoat. And he, of course, came from a rather well-to-do family. He heard about it and he went up to one of the missionaries and said, "You know here's thirty dollars or whatever--buy him a suit too."

Answers to Test

I was taking a history class from him--Ancient History. One of the students came up to him after class. He told this story in class. He said, "One of the students came to me and asked me what was going to be on the exam." He says, "Hell, you're in here to satisfy

your curiosity, not *mine*.”

The main thing that motivates him is the excitement of satisfying his own curiosity. He just can't stand not to know what the hell happened in history. It's just a consuming passion with him. He's not interested in fame or praise or recognition or anything.

Always Learning

I was going across campus just a couple of years ago--1992 or whatever. And I met him, he was headed down to the Richard's Building to swim, and I said, "Well what's exciting nowadays." And he says, "Oh, I have these Book of Mormon students." He says, "It's amazing what those young people come up with." He says, "One of my students wrote me a paper and pointed out something in the Book of Mormon and it's the most important thing in the Book of Mormon and I had never seen it!" He says, "Isn't that amazing. And I've forgotten what it was!" He's still very childlike in his eagerness to learn and his acknowledgment that anybody and everybody is in a position to teach him.

Editors

He hates editors. He doesn't trust editors. And there are reasons for that. Most editors don't want to let writers be writers they want to re-invent the writers. He used to publish regularly in the Improvement Era and they had to type-set his footnotes which were almost as lengthy as the text itself. Well the way the story goes, and I've tried to confirm this, the editor of the Era said, "Hugh, it costs us more to type-set your footnotes than the whole rest of the Improvement Era." He says, "Hugh, we just can't do this anymore." He says, "We don't want your footnotes." Hugh says, "Well a scholar is nothing without his footnotes. If that's the way you want it fine." And he didn't submit anymore copy. Well within a few months the general membership of the church realized that Nibley was missing and that's about all they were reading in the Improvement Era. [laughs] And they protested loudly. And so they started publishing him again.

The Classic Iconoclast

The Nibley stories are important because they confirm the existence of a man who is deeply principled, utterly incorruptible, child-like, and is not beholden to any other, he is devoted to the gospel and no other principles. He doesn't care what people think about. He doesn't care what other scholars say. He is single-minded and dedicated to the building up of the kingdom in his own unique child-like way. And most of us are overly concerned about what other people think about us. You remember that statement in his video where he says, "We all know the university is neither more nor less than a place to show off." And I think that is mainly why I tell them, to encourage students to be their own scholars, to be deeply skeptical of what professors and others say, to always question what the texts say, and Nibley is the classic iconoclast. He breaks up the images. He doesn't accept armchair history, shallow archeology. He does not accept as valid most of what goes on in the academic world. Nor should any of us. I use it largely to make that point.

Dissertation in a Month

Let's go back to his college days. There's the story about at Berkeley he wrote a dissertation and the committee rejected it because they said the subject was irrelevant. The subject was student riots in the ancient world. At Berkeley this was in 1934. He went back in a month he wrote another dissertation. Holed himself up in a part of the store and he says he ate moldy carrots and drank condensed milk for a month and wrote another dissertation.

Scholarship in the Church

He has strong feelings that there should be honest, valid scholarship in the church. And so for several years while he was writing about the Book of Mormon, and about the church and the restoration and Joseph Smith he was also publishing stuff in the Western Political Quarterly and he later had articles in several periodicals. He put it an interesting way. He said, "When I found that I could get anything published anywhere I was no longer interested in publishing." So I think what he did, he just decided to test his capacity as a scholar. I don't think there was any change. I think he just said, "Well now that I know I can play the world's game, I'm going to dedicate myself to the building up of the kingdom." I don't think there was any evolution of commitment or reorientation of thinking--that's too typical of skeptics in the church. [laughs] They're so concerned about what other people think of them that they try to establish their credibility in their scholarly discipline. And it pollutes what they do. You remember Brother Packer's talk on the artists who go for worldly acclaim and so they put the ladder against the wall and climb to the top and it's against the wrong wall. Well Nibley never makes mistakes like that. He just realized there was a lot of shotty scholarship in the church: among critics of the church, archaeologists in the church, historians in the church, theologians in the church and he exposed them all--simply by doing better scholarship.

Eccentric but Committed

He's an eccentric man. He is also gifted. I think the main reason that you can tell stories about Hugh and you can tolerate his eccentricities and in his old age he's becoming kind of, oh I don't know, very outspoken and so on and so forth but in an unqualified way he is committed to the gospel. There's no question where he stands or where his commitment is so he is so easy to forgive for all these eccentricities. He has no reservations at all. He doesn't make excuses. He is rock solid. And he's open, he's honest, he's candid. And he's a gentle man. He doesn't openly attack people. He doesn't judge other people. So in a sense he is a model saint, working in a discipline where the opposite qualities are typically celebrated. So he's just a refreshing contrast to what you'd typically get in the doctrinaire, dogmatic, unyielding, prideful exercise of the discipline and he's exactly the opposite to all that so in that sense he's a model scholar.

Eccentric Friends

One of the interesting things about Hugh: he almost worships eccentricity. All of his friends, all of the people he spends time with are brilliant, devil-may-care people, they're

their own people, they're gifted people, all open, honest, spontaneous, and he prizes these qualities in other people. And that tells everything about himself. He has very few friends. In fact two of his best friends, people he shoots the bull with are both non-members of the church. One was an Army acquaintance. The other was a school classmate. They're both featured in the film [Faith of an Observer]. They're just people he feels totally comfortable around. Why, I'm not sure.

Stimulating and Outspoken

Another reason I think he is so attractive is that he says things that nobody else is quite able or willing to say. And he always bases his comments on the scriptures. He never departs from the words of the brethren or the scriptures. You can read the scriptures over and over and you get new things, new things, new things. Well that's the way Nibley is. It's like Shakespeare. You can read Shakespeare over and over again and always get new insights as if you had never read it before. I think there is something stimulating about a man like that. Every time you see him, every time you read him, he contributes something new and different. Very stimulating person to be around.

Pokes Fun at Academia

I think one of the reasons I like him, and this might sound a little perverse, is that he sees, vividly, all of the inherent weaknesses in the academic system. That tape starts out with that prayer where he says, "Lord forgive us for standing here in the robes of the apostate priesthood." He pokes fun at the pretense, the dogmatism, that typically pervades a university atmosphere. And I had seen that since I had arrived here myself. [whispers] I realized that most of us were phoney. So I get some kind of perverse satisfaction at seeing someone articulate that I guess.

Underestimates Contribution

I've edited two volumes (of his complete works) and co-edited a third. And that is interesting. I think mainly I got drawn into it because there was a lot of work in it and people were too busy to do it but I was happy enough to do it. There's an interesting story there. While we were editing that and when we were going through that he just kicks and screams and objects and criticizes and says, "No I don't want this published." You see he says don't hold him responsible for anything he said more than three years ago. But we had a little, after one of the volumes we had a meeting down at the FARM's office. And he was obviously pleased. He was there with his wife. And after all his objections to any of this stuff being published he said, "Who would have ever thought that this would ever see the light of day?" Or he frequently says, "You know I was reading through some of that old stuff I used to write." And he says, "There's some pretty good stuff there." That is not apocryphal. That is just straight quote. Or at least the essence of it. He really underestimates his contribution.

Stephen E. Robinson 3/19/96

Born 5/23/47 in Los Angeles, CA

Background

Robinson has read most of what Nibley had written before becoming graduate student. He considers himself one of the Nibliophiles. While getting his Master's at BYU, he was one of Nibley's research assistants.

Footnote from Picture

I was Hugh Nibley's graduate teaching and research assistant in 1972 or 1973. It was my job to follow after him and double check his footnotes on all the stuff he was writing. At that point he was writing *The Joseph Smith Papyra: An Egyptian Endowment*. Footnotes for that are all over the map. We would occasionally find one that was messed up and so it wasn't unheard of for him to make a mistake. He did it all the time. And I tracked one particular reference down and there was text and he cited a page number in a certain book and I went there, I got the book and turned to the page number, it was obviously an error because it was in the plates section. It was just photographs and things like that. There was no text. So I went to see him at the end of the day and said "We have a broken reference here." He looked at it and said, "No, no, I'm sure that's right." I've got the book right here. I opened it, showed him. I said, "There's no text on the page. It's just photographs." He looked at it a second and then he said, "Yeah, here it is, right here." And he points to a photograph of a wall of a tomb and he's reading the text off the photograph of the tomb wall. Well what kind of a footnote is that? I mean, Nibley gets criticized by people who don't know the languages and can't follow the research and I thought that that would exacerbate that but he didn't care. He said, "No. As long as it's there, I don't care. I don't care if they can read it"

I know personally that that is true. When he reads a book he'll take his footnotes from the text or from the photographs or from the plates and other places that people might not have imagined.

Goat Mower

Some neighbors got offended that his yard was out of control. The grass was a foot high. They wanted him to mow it and he wouldn't do it and they went to the president of the university and complained and the president instructed him to take care of the problem. As the story goes, Nibley went and bought a goat and staked it out in his front yard and he just would move it everyday. That didn't make the neighbors any happier but at least the lawn was kept under control. I don't believe that happened.

Trustees in His Corner

There aren't very many college professors at a university who have several members of the board of trustees so firmly in his corner that he can't be touched and Nibley's enjoyed that. Even if he did get out of line, it's very difficult to bring him back. He has a tremendous latitude. He doesn't take advantage of it the way that some have or would if

they had it but I think that that has probably helped him to be iconoclastic. Everybody wants to be free of the rules and constraints and Nibley succeeds.

Intellectual Savior

Nibley is seen as many people as a kind of intellectual savior. He is doing things that nobody can check. We have to have faith in it. I mean he's reading photographs of paintings on temple walls. How do we know if what he says is true or not. I mean I didn't know when he said, "Yeah there it is right there." I didn't know, whether it was true or not. But I can't check it so I just on faith because it's Nibley accept the fact that he's full of grace and truth and so when people get nervous about things spiritual--when the academic and the spiritual come into conflict, it is easy to have a white knight who comes in with arguments that no one can understand in which we may have faith but he has intellectually defeated the enemy. But which we can't demonstrate because we don't know. To have faith in him, and thus hold on to our idea that the intellectual and the spiritual are one and that they've been justified and verified by this kind of intellectual savior who is full of grace and truth. That's been an important goal for Nibley.

Flawed Methodology

Unfortunately, in the field of biblical studies, most of the major figures and I don't know anyone who doesn't have tremendous respect for Nibley's intelligence. They are in awe of the breadth of his knowledge and his linguistic understanding. But I also don't know anyone who admires his methodology. And who would accept his conclusions most of the time because of his flawed methodology. Nibley knows where he's going when he starts and he just builds an academic bridge to get there. And that's not good method in many of the sciences including that aspect of history and linguistics that Nibley uses in discussing the gospel vis a vis the claims of the world. And while most of his stuff is right on, he frequently fudges--especially when he knows nobody is going to check. And I don't think it's vicious. And I don't think it's ill-will. I think he's just anxious to get his bridge built. And sometimes he incorporates a rotten timber here or there. And that used to happen. It was one of the advantages of being his research assistant, to see his flaws and to see him at work and how he worked and his methodology. As compared with the methodology of a Jim Charlesworth or Roland Murphy or Bruce Metzger--outside the church. But I have tremendous respect for Nibley. He is ahead of all the rest of us in terms of his intellect--one of the few *true* geniuses that I have met. He's just not that concerned with scholarly methodology and that is why his work, while it is read and admired in the church, it is not respected in terms of its conclusions outside the church.

Defender of the Faith

In the highest sense of the word apologist, yes he is. He's exactly that. Anyone who knows what their conclusions must be and then works to get to them is in fact an apologist, for some point of view that they have adopted for all priori reasons. And most latter-day saints know where they want to end up, and the gospel's true and Joseph was a prophet. These revelations are correct and so they start building a bridge to get there discarding evidence that would lead somewhere else and incorporating all the evidence

that goes in the direction that we want. I don't think that that's all that objectionable. But I'm aware of the difference of the methodology that we often use in the church and the methodology that is used outside of the church and being able to as a grad student on the Master's level work with Nibley and see that and be impressed by that and then go outside the church system to see some of the great biblical scholars... when I would see the meticulous working style and the extraordinary caution to make sure that this next sentence was impregnable from all points of view and from *all* evidence, not just that that I accepted as pertinent--it was quite a contrast.

Smoke and Mirrors

I still have tremendous affection and regard and respect for his gifts and for him as a person. But I am aware that he doesn't do what the masses of the LDS think that he does. He does not, in fact, come in with an unassailable intellectual argument that would be accepted across the board by Mormons and non-Mormons alike and defend the faith. If I were not a Latter-day Saint, it wouldn't take too much to dismantle some of the arguments he had put together. (Kent Jackson pointed this out in his review of one of the collected works) and he got crucified. The members of the church just wouldn't buy that. And that's not a reaction of the intellect, that's a reaction of the emotions reacting to someone trying to besmirch our intellectual savior. If Nibley can't be trusted, if he's not God in all that he writes, in all his defenses, then gee, maybe we're still vulnerable to the original attack. I think that that point of view is based on false premises and that the fear is unnecessary but I also think that most of the Nibliophiles have adopted those premises and would share that fear if they were trained enough in the methodologies of biblical study to see the often (not a majority of the time, not even most of the time but some of the time, so often is maybe the wrong word) but frequently Nibley will use bad methodology in getting where he wants to go. And when Keith pointed that out he just got reamed. He got hate mail for months. His review was impeccable. It was absolutely correct. And yet some of the most intellectual people on campus excoriated him for what he did. But Kent has also had the advantage of an objective, non-LDS, non-sectarian, theological course in the methodology in biblical studies...He's also seen some very good people at work and knows the difference between evidence that covers all the bases and answers all the possible questions and smoke and mirrors. Sometimes Nibley uses smoke and mirrors. But you don't want to say that. Because Nibley is not an intellectual icon, he is an emotional icon who works in intellectual things--but he is the savior of the church in those intellectual areas. And it is that emotional commitment to him as this white knight who defends us that people don't want to see tarnished because if he's not the white knight, if he's not our savior, then we're vulnerable.

Thematic Master

You've got to keep coming back to the other side of the coin. He is one of the truly great geniuses of our time. And most of what he writes is genius, especially when he's working with thematics and pulling together themes and motifs and following a thread from 3,000 BC to 2,000 AD. He's a genius at that kind of synthetic--pulling together from all over the planet all of these elements to support what he's talking about. And

he's also a genius when he's talking about social criticism. But as a pure academic his genius is sometimes shadowed by his occasional use of a spurious argument.

Flashlight in the Library

Richard Anderson tells when Nibley was working in his carrel in the library late one night, all the lights were out, everybody was gone. He had permission to use the library after hours. And he's the only one in the building. The janitor discovers that there's a pipe that's busted and needs to be repaired and there's water flooding into the basement. He finds Nibley and says, "I need your help." Nibley says, "Ah, alright," and leaves his carrel, goes downstairs and the janitor says, "Here you hold the light and I'll fix the pipe." As he's working on the pipe he notices the light is getting dimmer and dimmer and finally he's working in the dark. He turns around and says, "What's going on!" Nibley's got the flashlight on the book in his hand and he's standing there reading his book instead of helping with the repair of the pipe.

Hiding in Office

When his office was in the Joseph Smith Building, it was on the second floor--by request--because that wouldn't attract so much traffic. When he was in there studying, if someone knocked on the door he would be very quiet and pretend he wasn't there until they went away. And I know this is true because I was his research assistant and I would knock on the door and I knew he was in there. So I would listen, just wait and listen, and just two or three minutes later I would hear him shuffling around in there. I soon learned that I had to knock and say, "Dr. Nibley, it's Steve Robinson." And then he knew it was someone that he needed to talk to and so he would generally open the door then, but sometimes not even then. No explanation or an apology. He would just go stone still and not open the door until you went away. But I forgive him that because I think he had kind of an intellectual consecration. He said this comes first, this is what I'm supposed to do. This is what benefits the church and blesses the kingdom and everything else is secondary. And I think he worked on that assumption. And rightly so.

Cliff Top Revelation

The story that I was told by a teacher when I was an undergraduate, was that he was called into the commissioner's office and he said, "Now Hugh, how old are you?" And it was in his 30's and the commissioner said, "Well you know, we've got to be examples for the young people and there's going to be a problem if you don't get married soon. We won't be able to keep you here at BYU. They kept raising the temperature on him and finally he in desperation went up Rock Canyon and sat on a rock overlooking the canyon and he had been fasting and he began to pray and asked the Lord to help him find a wife and then as he was sitting there his wife walked up the canyon, just taking a walk. He figured that must be the one so he went down and introduced himself.

Type Figure

Once someone passes from a real person into a type, then the type is used for all stories that illustrate the virtues of that type--just like George Washington. Once he is the father

of the country and the fountain of all righteousness, all stories about righteousness--chopping down the cherry tree and not lying, having the strength to throw the silver dollar across the Potomac River, everything positive is attributed to that individual who has become that type for strength and righteousness and virtue. People don't want to hear about Washington's escapades because that's not, he *can't* be that because he is the father of our country and the ideal in which every American should be formed and if he really... did this or that than he can't be the type. It's a self-regulating thing. All stories of virtue and righteousness gravitate towards him or towards Lincoln, and all stories that would tarnish that image or that would bring us back to the real person are discarded. Nibley has become a type. He has become a mythic figure. And he embodies for us certain virtues and any story that is designed to illustrate those virtues gravitates to Nibley. Any evaluation that would go the opposite direction is immediately rooted out by that emotional part of us that wants him to be the font of academic and intellectual virtue. That is the mechanism. And he's past over into the mythic so that I'm sure the stories about him will continue and grow and get better and better--because of the emotional need it satisfies for the community of BYU--trying to make an uneasy marriage between the things of the spirit and the things of the world. Learning of the spirit and learning of the world. He becomes our champion.

Samuel R. Rushforth 3/25/96

Born 11/24/45 in Salt Lake City, UT

Background

Rushforth is a professor of Botany at BYU. He is a staunch Democrat and has taken a strong stand on environmental issues. He admires many of Nibley's views on politics and the environment.

Clean Air Symposium

When I was at the Clean Air Symposium (in the mid-80's) it was fun because I was sort of one of the organizers, I and some others and I know most of the EPA people that came over. They had four or five people who flew over from Denver for the meeting. When Hugh Nibley was speaking I was standing at the south windows with those guys we were having a conversation and then Nibley started talking. They looked at the audience responses and then they looked at this guy and they kept saying to me, "Who is this guy?! Who is this Nibley guy?! What in the world is going on here?!" It was a kick for me not only to see not only the audience response to Nibley but that *they* caught on that he was somebody special and that they could see that interaction. They were very, very interested in the whole sequence of events that they saw unfolding. I kept saying "I don't know how to tell you who he is! He's kind of an itinerant preacher among the Mormons who has an awful lot of credibility. He thinks about Green issues, he thinks about social issues, thinks about war and peace and he has a lot of credibility." That was a fun thing for me to see these guys respond to that.

They saw Nibley and they're looking at each other and at the audience but then when Joe Cannon got up they could just hardly believe it. They saw that something very unusual had gone on. Here was this Old Guy who had gotten up and given a pretty interesting speech and the audience responded greatly and then Cannon follows him and kind of doesn't know what to say. Again, the audience responded very dramatically to the whole circumstance and so did they. They kept saying, "Oh my goodness, this is *really* interesting."

Steven C. Walker

Born 10/15/41 in Payson, UT

Background

Walker received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1973. Before doing so, however, he distinguished himself as being the only professor in the history of BYU to lose both the entire draft and all the notes to his Master's thesis. He has taught at BYU since 1973 and won the English Teacher of the Year Award at BYU six years in a row. He now serves as the assistant chair of the English Department.

Always Reading

He doesn't do it now but when I first knew him he was always reading as he walked across campus. I very often saw him with an open book. You never saw him trip or fall down. But I liked that, read as you go, I do that in the car myself. He can't get enough of the learning.

Classic Comics

When I first came back to Provo after graduate school, and we were in a High Priest's Quorum Meeting, you meet quarterly, all the high priests for the stake. I came in late, sat on the back row and realized I was sitting next to the great Hugh Nibley--who was reading and reading a classics comic book, I think it was Great Expectations. And I just, I love that [laughs] because it said to me that he would learn from whatever source he could, *even* in high priests group meeting, *even* from classic comics. The man, I think the reason he has such breadth of knowledge is that he just keeps piling it in there.

John W. Welch 5/96

born in 1946 in Boston, MA
grew up in Whittier, CA

Background

Welch practiced law in Southern California before becoming a professor at BYU. He founded the Foundation for Ancient Research and Ancient Studies which is the main publisher of Nibley's works. He also serves as editor in chief of *BYU Studies*.

Nibley's Youth

In Glendale, California, the house they lived in was a big house. A lot of people don't understand Nibley when he talks out against wealth and things of that nature. Some people think that it's just "Well, he's a poor professor so he's just complaining." And maybe he is complaining. But he started out as a very wealthy child. There are stories about how the family ate with, and of course they had domestic servants who served dinner with complete silver service, very formal dining. He and his brother Reid competed a great deal and there were lots of prestigious house guests who came in, particularly musicians. So Nibley was, as a young boy, engaging in lots of fairly high level conversations with these people. He learned to impress them. He talks about playing a game with these people. But he would also frequently not want to come down for dinner because he was reading his books. I can't verify all of these details, but so I've heard. Some of this comes from him and some from Phyllis and some from others. But basically Phyllis has told me that he was pretty much a spoiled child. If he wanted to stay in his room, they would have the meal brought up on silver service to his room. So he grew up literally with a silver spoon in his mouth. But he saw his family lose enormous fortunes in the Depression. He also, of course, felt a lot of the money that had been earned by Charles W. Nibley and then his father were wrongfully obtained from butchering Redwoods in Northern California and Oregon. When the money was lost, Nibley looked philosophically upon the loss of the family fortune.

Shakespeare Group

He attended Los Angeles High School. There was a group of very bright high school students who were into drama and they would have contests memorizing Shakespeare and sit and recite Shakespeare back to each other until one of them made a mistake. Nibley still to this day will weave Shakespearean phrases into his talks and articles. They are sometimes obscure little phrases that no one has ever really associated directly with Shakespeare. In editing a lot of Nibley's stuff, if you are attentive to it, you even wonder, "Well, should I put quote marks on this and say it is from *Hamlet*?" And *Hamlet* was his favorite. I think he can probably recite most of it still today.

College Scholarship

Nibley won a very prestigious scholarship to Berkeley to do graduate work. His father didn't want him to just put the money in a bank. He said, "Give me the money and I'll invest it." He in fact ended up losing the money. So Nibley went through graduate

school without the benefit of his scholarship, living in a very poor little spot, basically just eking out an existence during the Depression in Berkeley. I think the contrast between having had all of that at one time is an interesting part of his background.

Dissertation

He had originally planned to do his dissertation on one subject. He used to keep shoe boxes full of these note cards that he would get from the library--old rejected catalog cards that he would write on the back of. He started keeping notes as a graduate student like that. He was running around doing his shopping and somehow the shopping cart got tipped over and all of his note cards just went spewing out and spread across the floor. He was really wrestling with this topic and trying to get something going with it. When he saw the whole thing he just said, "I didn't like the subject very much anyway." He walked out and left the topic. He never got back to reorganizing his notes. He went on to pull together very quickly, in three weeks, his dissertation on Roman Games.

German Missionary

Of course he had been a missionary in Germany before the war so he spoke very good German. He likes to tell the story of a place that he visited after the war that he had tracted through in south Germany. Someone had been fairly unreceptive to the Gospel and he and his companion had cursed the people there. He says, "Sure enough, when we came back the house was completely burned and all that was left was the stone doorway"

Passing the Hat

I've heard that he was in south Germany and that he was just sitting there in a priesthood meeting. He had walked in a little late and before he had gotten in there they had announced that there was a missionary who needed a new coat. It was of course him. They passed a hat to collect money so that they could buy him a coat. He didn't care about clothes! He wore these old ragged things. When the hat came around he took out 100 marks or something, a lot of money, and he said, "Well, whoever it is, have him buy some shoes too! He must need some shoes!" I don't know how close that is to anything that really happened but it's typical of the way he would have approached it.

Jeep

He had a Jeep in the war which was unusual because he was an intelligence officer. So he could get around a lot like this. Sometimes he even had to go to East Germany to get some (I can't remember the details on this story) but there was an important aristocrat who needed to be taken out before the Russians captured him. Nibley drove him out in his Jeep kind of disguised. Kind of a Great Escape story. It's kind of unusual to think of Nibley roaming around Germany doing all kinds of odd assignments. He filed reports on all of these. Gordon Thomasson has always wanted to send someone to the national records. I suppose somewhere deep in the intelligence records of some federal, military installation are a whole bunch of G-2 reports and other kinds of things that Nibley filed on all of these experiences. It would be interesting if someone found them to get the story straight.

Intelligence Officer

Nibley was an intelligence officer and every pocket of his clothing was classified. He had to keep certain information in each one of those pockets because if he got shot, people needed to know exactly where to find certain things. He had smuggled a copy of the Book of Mormon into one of those pockets. I guess no one was there inspecting. Still, he felt strongly enough about the Book of Mormon that he wanted to have a copy of that with him so he took it with him into battle on D-Day. That's one of the reasons, I guess, he was thinking about the Book of Mormon as they approached the shore.

Compulsive Reader

He likes to talk about going into the bookstore in Heidelberg. Here he is with the advanced intelligence corp moving right ahead with the American troops as they move on into Germany and he is most interested in and goes by a bookstore. As Truman Madsen used to say, "No more could he walk by a bookstore than an alcoholic could walk by a saloon."

World War Two Stories

When he was waiting for D-Day he went around and he rummaged through all of the bookstores that he could find in London and bought quite a few books which were apparently sold very inexpensively then. The war was on and people were desperate. For just a few dollars you could buy a lot of books. He still has most of these books down in his garage. Many of them became the basis for things that he researched after the war. He brought these books back. A lot of them are in German. Eduard Myer's materials on ancient history and other things like that that you see him citing a lot. We had a lot of trouble finding these books when we did his source checking. Some people have criticized Nibley saying that he is citing things that don't exist. Well, they may be hard to find, but they do exist. We finally found them. A lot of them were found in his garage. Even when he was in the military he was always on the prowl for academic materials.

The Bridge

He was assigned to collect information on one of the bridges on the Rhine River. He had to go out and determine, ahead of the rest of the troops, how strong the Germans were--what it was going to take for the Allied Forces to take that bridge. He was commanded to stay there until "the last dog was hung." So all the others pulled back and he had to stay and watch until they were so close that he could count how many there were and then he had to take off without being detected. So he was actually out there as a front line intelligence officer on several occasions.

Out-witting the Germans

He loves to tell stories about how the Germans were confused and didn't know what was going on. How he could walk right into certain places and speak the language, rummage through files and collect information. How he would arrive at a place just after bombs had hit there, or leave a place just before the bombs began to fall. I tell those stories just

to show how much his life was at risk. And more to show how much the Lord wanted to preserve this guy pretty badly because he could have easily have been killed a hundred times over. And he was fairly reckless, I think, about his own safety.

Maxwell Quote

As Elder Maxwell likes to say, we can just be grateful that his spirit didn't come to earth sometime during the Middle Ages when it would have been lost somewhere in a monastery and never saw the light of day.

Interrogation Story

He detested the idea of having to interrogate people. Instead of choosing the safe intelligence branch which allowed the gathering and interrogation of prisoners and the deciphering of cryptograms and things like that back in an office somewhere--that was distasteful to Nibley because he didn't want to have to force people to disclose information that they were under an obligation of secrecy to not divulge. I don't know if it was temple related or whatever but he respected their need to keep things secret and private. So he preferred to risk his own life out on the front lines and do what he had to do in order of battle.

Engagement Story

There is the coming to Provo story and John Widstoe calling him to come to BYU and telling him, "You've got to go to BYU and get a wife." Some people tell that story a little bit too harshly. As if he just walked up and said, "Here, you're the first girl I've met and I'm supposed to marry you." He did end up marrying the first girl he met. But he courted her. Phyllis was actually a very accomplished musician. They went out to concerts and things like that right away. It did work out. He didn't waste any time.

Book of Mormon Class

I had Nibley as a Book of Mormon teacher as a freshman in 1964. It was an honors class. I found out that after I had enrolled for credit that several of the people in the class were just auditing it. I thought, "What am I doing?" I had studied quite a bit of Latin and ancient history in high school and even a little bit of Greek which is unusual. So I wasn't too intimidated right off the bat. I had read *Lehi in the Desert*. Bob Thomas who was the director of the honors program highly recommended this [class]. One of the reason's I took the class is because I had had a Sunday School teacher who was going to law school in southern California who had been at BYU in the late fifties and had taken several of Nibley's classes. He used to regale us with stories about Nibley all the time. One of his favorite ones was walking up to Nibley after a lecture and asking if he could have a copy of the lecture notes from that period. Nibley said, "Well, you're welcome to have them but I'm sorry, they're in Coptic today."

The Midterm Exam

We walked into the midterm and had no idea what the test would be. Nibley had not given us any prior explanation and I don't think he had decided until that morning. But

we walked into class and he said, "Alright here is your test." He said, "Alright, you've just received a letter from" I can't remember the magazine but it was something like the *New Yorker*. "And they would like you to write a book review of the Book of Mormon. Write the book review." And he walked out of the class. That was the test.

Out of Body Experience

The fact that he had an out of body experience had a very important impact on his life, in letting him know that no matter how much knowledge he would accumulate here on this earth, it was only an infinitesimal fraction of the kind of knowledge that is available on the other side of the veil. And he has never forgotten that.

Motorcycle Incident

I tell some of my law students this story. The Nibleys didn't have automobile insurance and one of their sons was involved in an accident. A person on a motorcycle was injured quite seriously. I don't know all of the details but I do know the outcome. Although there were some problems with the Nibley's case, witnesses were available who would have testified that the motorcyclist was at fault. But Nibley did not want to pursue this in court. He didn't believe in going to court very much. They preferred to borrow the money and pay off a settlement in that lawsuit. I think it took the family about a decade to work their way through that. Financially that was a real difficult blow. I use this to illustrate that we are a little too much of a litigious society. When Nibley talks about the lawyers and business people and everybody putting so much emphasis on money, people need to realize that he has lived the way he talks. To him it is far more important to settle than to be litigious. I also tell the story to say that he should have had insurance. It is kind of an absent-minded professor story. A lot of people in those circumstances would have said, "It wasn't my fault. These things happen." But he owned up to the responsibility.

Dentist

Nibley went in at 9 O'clock one morning for a root canal. He had to give a lecture at 11 O'clock same day. And so he said, "I don't want any anesthetic! Don't give me any of that Novocaine! I have to talk and I can't talk if my mouth is all numb." The dentist, David Wright, said, "This is going to hurt, it's gonna hurt a lot!" He says, "Well, we come to this earth to have pleasure and pain. Drill!" He had a root canal with no anesthetic.

Amazing Memory

[After filming a video in Hugh's house] we turned off the cameras and all the lights down and he and I were sitting there chatting and I asked him a question about one of the Greek poets he had mentioned. He said, "Oh yeah, that is a beautiful poem, very interesting." He then turned to reciting this fairly lengthy Greek, lyric poem from the fifth century B.C. all in elegiac couplets. He beautifully recited this thing from memory. After he got through I was almost speechless but I said, "Hugh, how long ago was it that you last read that poem?" He said, "Oh, that would have been at Berkeley." In the thirties. Fifty

years ago. So again, amazing memory.

Computer-like Ability

I've been able to take short trips, once in a while, with him. Not long ones but take him places or drive up to dinners at Deseret Book when they honor him or meetings at various places and things like that. We talk in the car as we go up and back. I'm usually working on one thing or another and I'll ask him [questions]. This story comes before the day when we had Infobases and wordprocessors and WordCrunchers where you can put into a computer a search for a certain word and just say "Give me all the places where this word occurs." I would frequently just ask Nibley, "What do you know about . . .?" And then I would give him a word or a phrase. I was interested in "priestcraft." "What do you think the word 'priestcraft' means? Where does the word appear?" I just put that question to him as we got on the freeway. He didn't respond right away but about ten minutes later he said, "Okay, now here's 'priestcraft.' You wanted to know." It was like the computer had just been searching all through his mind. Then all of a sudden, out came one reference after another. He hadn't been thinking about 'priestcraft' [before this incident]. He hadn't gone to the index and looked it all up. But one reference after another--more than I could have remembered off the top of my head and he was talking about the context in which it appeared and things of that nature. I did that frequently with him. His mind works that way. I don't know how his mind is wired but it has the ability to associate things. It's not a free association but there's always one thing that links the one thought to the next. And sometimes it's a linear thing where he just goes off in a certain direction. Other times he just hovers over a topic and criss-crosses back and forth through it. But of course seeing patterns in things has been an important part of his scholarship. It's largely that his patternism is informed by a mind that works this way, just almost naturally. I'm not sure how it is that he calls up all of this [information]. I suppose a lot of it is involuntary. Put a message into your brain and your brain sends you some things back. It's amazing what his brain is able to bring back and then to associate.

Note Cards

One of the reasons his brain does that [free association] is that he always packs stuff in. There are stories about him walking around campus with note cards, memorizing vocabulary [words]. He did that constantly. His head would be down and he would just be walking across campus. He did it everywhere he went, flipping note cards in whatever language it was. When I had him as a professor he'd have a stack of cards wherever he was. If he needed to wait for ten minutes, out came the cards.

On Landscaping

There's the story of the Elder's Quorum who came over to mow his lawn and trim his hedges and he came out, shook his hand at them and said, "If the Lord wanted my grass shorter he would have made it differently. Leave it alone! I just like it natural." I assume that's a true story. I don't know.

Department Chair

I'd like to know if this story is true. Nibley won't ever answer me when I ask him. Apparently some time he was made department chairman of the religion department. He said, "I don't want to do it. I don't believe in bureaucracy. I won't be an administrator. I'm a scholar." They said, "Well, we need you to be the department chair. Everybody has to take a turn and it's your turn." He said, "Well, you can call me that but I won't do any of the work. I just don't want to do it." So he had a box on his desk and whenever mail came relating to the department stuff he just tossed it in the box. After about three or four weeks of not answering any mail or getting around to any meetings or doing any business, they finally just put someone else in as department chair. Now I can believe that story because Nibley does have a big box, at least he used to, of mail that would come in. He would just put the mail in the box. If he felt like answering letters he would reach in, rattle around in the letters and pull one out and say, "OK, I'll answer this one today. He'd get around to it in his own due time. I think he would have gotten around to doing any of the administrative work eventually, but he was more concerned with meeting sometimes weekly deadlines for lectures and broadcasts and classes and things like that. I'm sure that if he didn't keep up on the administrative side it was because that was at the bottom of the pile. I'd like to know if he ever really was the chairman. Maybe it was just a committee or something like that.

KBYU

KBYU needed some footage of Nibley once. I don't know what they wanted to use it for but they just wanted him lecturing to put on as background or something. They didn't want him actually giving a lecture, they just wanted the visual of him standing at a lectern and speaking to a class. The easiest thing was to bring him to the studio. I said, "Well, do you want a class?" And they said, "No, just bring him over and we'll just put him here and he can lecture and we'll just video in here." So I took him out to the motion picture studio where they had a room with a lecturn. It looked like a regular classroom and obviously they used it for filming classes. They had about fifty empty chairs in the room. He said, "Alright, what do you want me to do?" And I said, "Well, they just want you to lecture. An hour ago you were giving a lecture on The Pearl of Great Price, why don't you just keep going. Just pick up where you left off." He said, "Okay, I could do that." So he walked into the room and got up to the microphone and started lecturing. I went back into the sound booth where the technician was adjusting everything. I said to Hugh, "Just keep talking; we'll get what we need." The lecture was fascinating. We probably ended up getting about thirty minutes of tape of him lecturing on Moses chapter two. He just went on and on and on. We could have stopped him after about ten minutes but I was interested and I wanted to hear what he had to say. We just let him go and the technician thought it was fine and kept recording just in case he needed some backup footage. The thing that was amazing was that he lectured just as vigorously, with as much animation, as he would have if there had been an overflow crowd sitting there in front of him. It finally dawned on me, that is the way Nibley lectures. He will lecture the same way to one person or to a thousand people. He gets up and you turn him on (I don't mean that rudely) but he begins to talk and he is so engrossed in his own lecture that he

really doesn't care what people out there are thinking or whether they're following him. Some people complain that he mutters a little bit or that he is hard to follow. He never makes an effort to coax the audience along, to stop and repeat himself, to summarize, to say, "Here's what I'm trying to tell you. Am I communicating to you?" That's not Nibley's style. He just talks. And it's up to you to get out of it whatever you're able to get. I'm not sure who his audience is. That's so different than our normal ideas about communication. For him it is a matter of integrity and personal sincerity. He will say what he is going to say. And he's doesn't allow the audience to set his agenda or to manipulate his approach. He's going to be himself no matter what.

BYU Philosophy

Why do we tell these stories? We have a dream and vision of BYU being a place where first-rate, credible scholarship is combined with gospel interests. Nibley typifies that effort. He's not perfect; none of us are. But he was willing to leave the grandeur and the glory that was Rome for the modesty that was Provo so that he could come and do things with greater freedom here at BYU, to bring scholarship and his religious interests together, than he could have done elsewhere. We celebrate Nibley largely because we find it so rare that people have either the time or the talents or the opportunity to devote the kind of time and effort that he has to bringing those together and doing them so well. A lot of the stories that we tell feed into that. He certainly was capable of publishing endlessly in the publishing houses of the world. Instead he chose to work in a church framework but to do so in a way that would qualify him in the minds of a James Charlesworth or other people to say, "this guy is believable." That combination of the great intellectual capabilities assure us that the more you know, the more you see the big picture and make these connections and linkages, all truth can be circumscribed into one great whole. Nibley stands as a paragon of that sort of thing. We tell stories about Nibley to show that he practices what he preaches. He is a sincere, honest person. He's not just out playing games with people. BYU sees itself as a very sincere place. We want to be honest and open. What you see is what you get with a Latter-day Saint. We try to have that kind of openness. Nibley goes to the temple regularly. People tell stories of Nibley going to the temple and saying, "I learn something new every time I come." That's pretty impressive. The glory of God is intelligence is one of our main motifs at the university. Life is a continuous learning process. We tell stories about him because it reinforces our conviction that that mission is not a mission impossible. It is in fact something we should all try to emulate. We tell stories on his bureaucracy and his clothes to say that at least for us here at the university, the pursuit of knowledge and the life of the mind is extremely important--more important than some of these other things. Many people come to BYU and give up a lot of other opportunities to do something. We tell stories on Nibley to reinforce our commitment to that sacrifice. People are here at BYU out of their commitment and out of love for what BYU stands for. Nibley had the same choice maybe a little more visible than others and maybe a little earlier than others. He was probably the first who could have taught at any university in the world. He chose to come to BYU. He came at a time when we didn't have a lot of real top-rate scholars. We do now. We have an outstanding faculty. We tell stories of Nibley to remind us that

we're still here out of a sense of mission. This place is different. We can do things here that you can't do anywhere else.

William A. Wilson 10/2/94
Born in 9/23/34 in Tremonton, UT

Background

Wilson is the director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies and Director of the Folklore Archives, both at BYU. He was educated at BYU and at Indiana University and has taught at both institutions as well as the University of Oregon, UCLA and USU.

Wilson has published widely on religious folklore, on folk narrative, and on the history of folklore scholarship. He is the author of the award-winning *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland*. He has known of Nibley ever since he was an undergraduate student.

Ph.D. Exams

This is a story I heard so many years ago that I don't remember where I heard it. This happened a long time ago, back in the 60's when I started teaching at BYU. I had heard all kind of stories about this eccentric professor. And one of the things that I remember hearing was that when he took his exams, his Ph.D. exams they were all worried about who would examine him because [laughs] they were afraid that he would show them up.

This highlights the fact that he's really supposed to be brilliant. We don't have very many brilliant scholars of Mormon, actually brilliant Mormons. But he's sort of the king in the minds of many *the* church scholar, the one that people turn to for questions about the Book of Mormon and supposedly he knows many languages and he has studied with great care and all of that. For me it just highlights the point that he is a very intelligent, capable person. So intelligent and capable that the professors were afraid to examine him for fear that he would show *them* up.

Eccentric College Professor

I had an impression of Hugh Nibley as an eccentric college professor. Very absent-minded, very learned, very scholarly and strange in some way. As I heard new stories about him, or saw him, I was prepared to interpret them based on the other stories which I had heard.

Note-takers

During those early 60's I was walking across the campus. And I saw him walking with a couple of students on each side. Pretty day outside. I don't remember which season of the year it was. And as I observed that at close range. He was lecturing to these, must have been class, they decided to go for a walk. At least these were disciples. Either students in a class or people who hung onto his every word because as they walked these people were desperately taking notes on both sides as they walked across campus trying to get what he had said.

Marshall Craig

This is not a personal experience. Marshall Craig, former chair of the English Department, long-time English Department faculty member, had been in the library and

had checked out dozens of books and was struggling out of the library with his arms full of these books trying to keep them balanced and as he left the library he passed Hugh Nibley coming in. And Hugh Nibley looked at him and said, "Huh. You look like Hugh Nibley."

I asked Marshall Craig later if he had ever had that experience and he said no. This was again an apocryphal story floating around that got attached to him. Interesting because the story at least shows Nibley being aware of Nibley's reputation. I'm sure he must be aware of his own reputation but that story never happened. At least it didn't happen to Marshall Craig. Maybe it happened to somebody else. The story got attached to Marshall Craig. I don't know.

Why He Tells Stories

I tell these stories fairly often. I would tell these in a class. The reason I would is because very often in a folklore class we talk about the fact that college students form in close groups, they have their own folklore and one of the traditional kinds of college lore is the eccentric professor. So then I might tell a couple of stories to illustrate that point. It works very well in my folklore class because I can use these stories as examples of a certain genre of folklore, the eccentric college professor, told in a particular folk group, college group and especially student group.

The Brigham Young University Folklore of Hugh Winder Nibley:
Gifted Scholar, Eccentric Professor and Latter-day Saint Spiritual Guide

Jane D. Brady

Department of English

M.A. Degree, August 1996

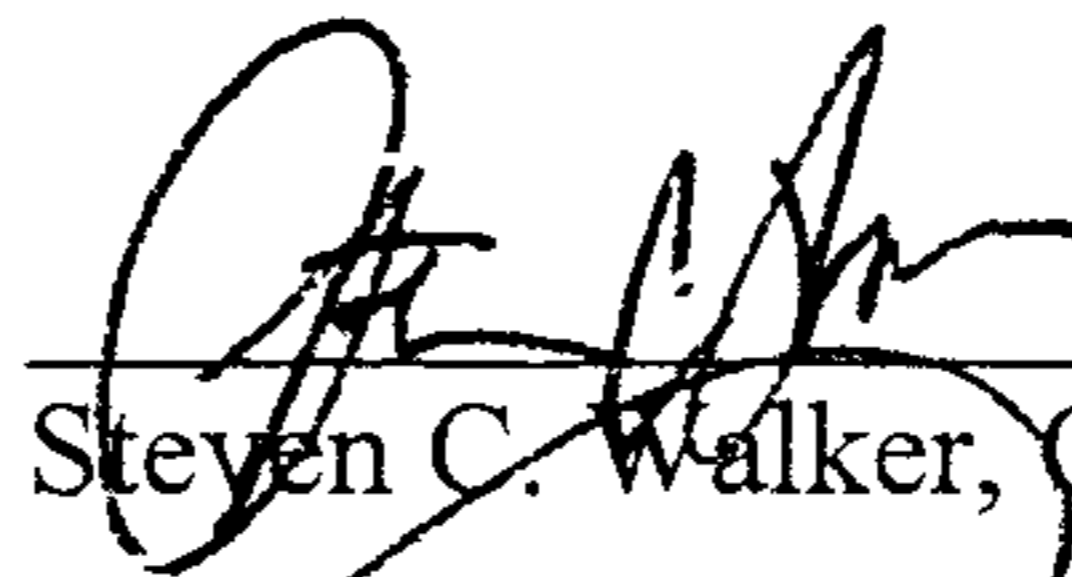
ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the stories which revolve around folk legend Hugh Winder Nibley and what those stories mean to the people of Brigham Young University. Folklore reveals who we are and what is important to us. But, interestingly, folklore tends to reveal more about the person *telling* the story than about the subject of the story itself. People can't remember every story they hear. The ones they do remember are important to them. The stories are important because they fulfill basic needs of the teller. Such needs are a desire to look up to a hero, a need to fit in and belong to a group, a need to feel superior, a need to reinforce paradigms, a wish to instill others with values one believes in, a wish fulfillment, or a desire for entertainment. Nibley plays many roles for the people of BYU including hero, iconoclast, eccentric, spiritual guide, and defender of the faith. Whether remembering our group past or individual past, stories fill the functions of codifying what is acceptable behavior, releasing tension, illustrating an important point, mitigating the harshness of life, and providing a unifying link between people in a community. Stories *are* important. The Nibley stories I have collected demonstrate what BYU as a community feels deeply about.

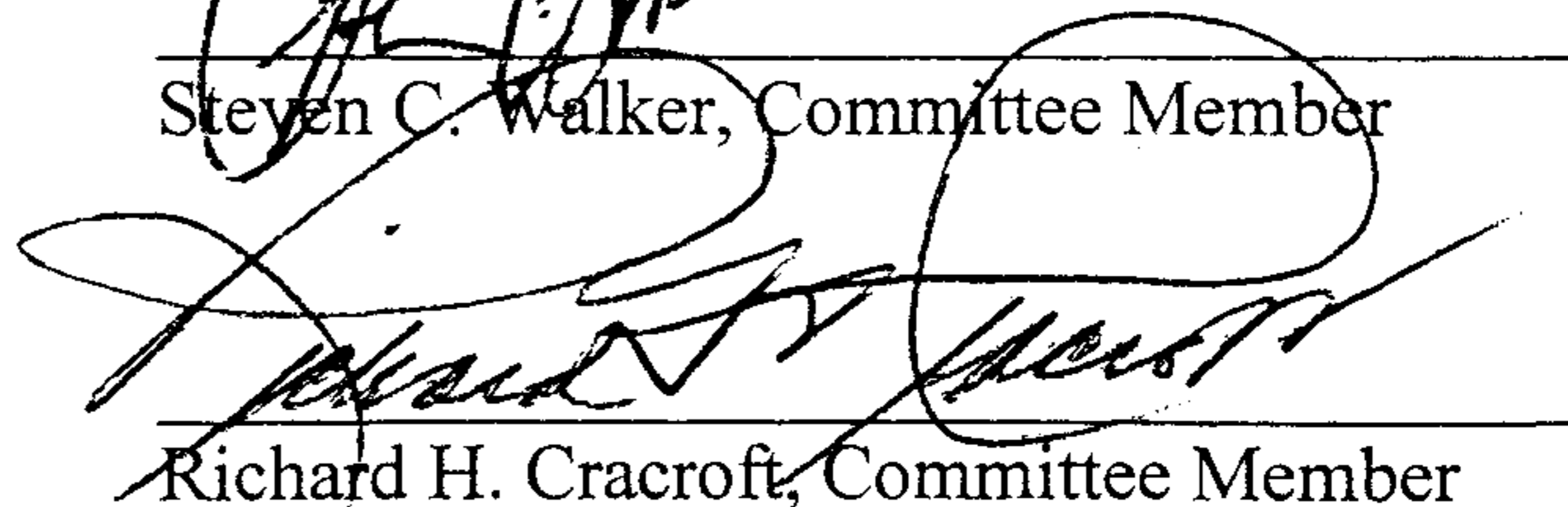
COMMITTEE APPROVAL:



William A. Wilson, Committee Chair



Steven C. Walker, Committee Member



Richard H. Cracroft, Committee Member



Jesse S. Crisler, Graduate Coordinator