

Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*

Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002

Reviewed by Gary P. Gillum

**H**ugh Winder Nibley is known for the diversity of his writings and activities, which compare more easily to the impressionistic music of Debussy than to the works of an orderly Beethoven or to an inexhaustible smorgasbord of culinary delights than to a formal seven-course banquet. His life calls for an equally diverse and interesting biography, which is provided by his son-in-law, Boyd Jay Petersen. *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* began as a birthday present for the author's daughter, Mary, born in 1989. As Nibley approached his eightieth birthday, Petersen wanted to preserve Nibley's legacy for Mary, since he feared that "with time's winged chariot hurrying near, there may not be a chance for her to really get to know her grandfather."<sup>1</sup>

Once he tapped into the mother lode of Nibley's correspondence, however, he realized that the project had a much larger audience than just his family. The result of fourteen years of research and writing is a valuable family history of which we are all beneficiaries. Boyd Petersen has more than fulfilled his wish "to preserve the truth that lurks below these stories and to preserve the status of this hero in our culture" (xxx).<sup>1</sup>

Petersen has concocted a delicious soup of inspiring quotes from Nibley's witty and learned correspondence, much of which is written to his life-long friend Paul Springer, whom Nibley had met at Berkeley while studying for his PhD. These priceless and mostly unpublished letters form a veritable journal or autobiography of Nibley's life that is candid, spontaneous, ironic, and playful.

Petersen has arranged the biography so that major theme chapters are juxtaposed with biographical chapters. The book combines humor,

personal insights, and events, thereby building bridges to understanding a complicated man, both optimist and pessimist, both honorer and merciless criticizer of Brigham Young University. Each of the twenty-six chapters is illustrated by at least one photograph. The book includes an index and five appendices: a chronology, a genealogy, Nibley's "Letter from the Front, 1945," Nibley's "Letter to Sterling M. McMurrin, 23 August 1967," and "Shalamar," a skit given by sixty-year-old Nibley at a 1970 BYU Women's Program.

A poignant foreword by Zina Petersen, one of Hugh Nibley's children and the author's wife, adds a voice of authority and experience. Her thirteen intimate vignettes of Nibley are insightful memories of her father's (and family's) multidimensional life. The closing two sentences of her foreword are some of the most illuminating of the entire book, "Growing up with Hugh Nibley as a father, I learned this: the world, with all its exhilaration, giddiness, and danger, is actually pretty safe, as long as you are on a course that has strong ropes and sturdy knots and an unmovable, unshakable faith pushing you higher. Then all you have to do is hang on tight" (xix). Boyd Petersen's introduction, "The Man and the Legend," is thought-provoking and humorous, debunking some of the classic Nibley legends and affirming others as outrageous "gospel truth."

The unpretentious and animated prose of *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* flows naturally, although it is not as tightly written in some chapters as in others. In some places, the book suffers from mechanical kerning and type-setting errors. When asked what his father-in-law thought of the book, Petersen responded that Nibley had found an error on page 54, where the church father Lactantius's name was spelled "Lectangus." Other than that one observation, Nibley seemed pleased with Petersen's gargantuan effort to write an honest and balanced portrayal of his life.

The dust jacket is beautifully designed, although the color transfer in Rebecca Everett's portrait of Nibley needs the tan (rather than pink) hues of the original painting. In fact, the entire cover—which includes a photograph of Nibley and quotes about Nibley by Gordon B. Hinckley, Neal A. Maxwell, and Boyd K. Packer—is such an integral part of the biography that it would have been better incorporated into the book. Readers will find themselves removing the dust jacket to protect it while they read the biography instead of using the cover to protect the book.

*Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* is the appropriate title for this book, for it reviews the importance of Nibley's message—which is, in the end, the Savior's message of the gospel. Chapter 9, "'One Peep at the Other Side': Hugh Nibley's Life of Faith," may be the most spiritual part of the biography, but it is balanced by the entertaining non sequiturs and Laurel-and-Hardy

slapstick comedy in “Shalamar.” Certainly the most difficult chapter to write was the penultimate chapter 25, where Petersen assesses the current climate of the Nibley family. We learn that Nibley’s own parents were strictly Victorian, so it is no surprise when Zina characterizes her father as exhibiting “comfortably Victorian detached fondness” (xix), which transforms itself into pure delight and wonder when he is around small children.

The biography’s most insightful piece of information about Nibley is the account of his interest in leaving BYU in February 1955 to take a position at the University of Utah (272). President Ernest L. Wilkinson was so concerned that he took the matter to the executive committee of the Church Board of Education. President J. Reuben Clark of the First Presidency was then assigned to convince Nibley to stay at BYU and, in doing so, Clark suggested four research projects that Nibley could work on at BYU:

1. A new translation of the Bible “with reference to ancient manuscripts,”<sup>2</sup>
2. An assessment of “the works of the early ‘heretics,’”<sup>3</sup>
3. A careful evaluation of “the works of the [early church] Fathers . . . to get an idea of their early teachings,” and
4. A translation of the Aztec Codes (273).

Nibley has been variously called an eschatological thinker, a Renaissance man, a true hero of World War II, a polymath, a multiglot, a truth seeker and truth defender, an expounder, and an eternal amateur “with guts.” After thirty-four years of knowing this enigmatic brother, I see Nibley as a hobo bravely and blithely sitting on top of a boxcar, preferring to suffer the wind and bugs and sunburn in order to allow his curiosity a 360-degree view, rather than merely facing forward with the passengers and engineers inside the cars. To others he may seem an erudite mystic, but Boyd Jay Petersen finds him an authentic, down-to-earth and up-to-heaven, constant, consistent “messenger of light” who wants no disciples for himself but instead leads scholars to the Savior. Elder Neal A. Maxwell’s definition of a disciple-scholar describes Hugh Nibley almost faultlessly:

For a disciple of Jesus Christ, academic scholarship is a form of worship. It is actually another dimension of consecration. Hence one who seeks to be a disciple-scholar will take both scholarship and discipleship seriously; and, likewise, gospel covenants. For the disciple-scholar, the first and second great commandments frame and prioritize life. How else could one worship God with all of one’s heart, might, *mind*, and strength? (Luke 10:27)<sup>4</sup>

*Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* is delightful and informative reading both for perennial “Nibley watchers” as well as for students who know little about him. A more definitive and in-depth biography of Nibley should

some day be written, but it would be impossible to duplicate both the immediacy and the panoramic sweep of Petersen's work. This biography will surely become a much-discussed and much-loved portrayal of the man some consider our own latter-day church father.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Boyd Petersen, "The Life of the Mind in the Household of Faith: Hugh Nibley's Influence at Brigham Young University," sound recording (House of Learning Lecture, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, March 19, 2003).

2. Given President Clark's love for the King James Version of the Bible, this item is particularly noteworthy.

3. Clark believed such early heretics' "ideas were often statements of true principles which the [Catholic] Church had thrown away" (273).

4. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Disciple-Scholar," in *On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar*, ed. Henry B. Eyring (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995), 7; italics in original.

5. Richard L. Anderson, a colleague of Nibley's for many years, even called Nibley a "national treasure" whose importance, unfortunately, has not been recognized by many scholars outside the Church.