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Hugh Nibley Observed

Appreciation
Stephen T. Whitlock

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APPRECIATION

Stephen T. Whitlock

Although I had previously read books and articles by Hugh Nibley, I began to take a stronger interest in his work when attending Weber State College in 1978. I used to stop by Deseret Industries on the way home from classes, and they had a rich collection of Latter-day Saint books and copies of the *Improvement Era* dating back to the early 1920s. I collected those issues where Nibley (and others) had long-running serialized articles. Among these were “The Book of Mormon as a Mirror of the East,” “Lehi in the Desert,” “The World of the Jaredites,” “Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times,” “The Stick of Judah and the Stick of Joseph,” “New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study,” “The Way of the Church,” “There Were Jaredites,” “Censoring the Joseph Smith Story,” “Mixed Voices,” “Since Cumorah,” and “A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price.” Some of these were later published in book form, and I believe all of them now, in updated form, appear within the 19 volumes of the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (CWHN).

I discovered more of his writings when one of the earliest indexes of his works became available. I used that to locate many more articles and publications. One of the hardest to obtain a legible copy of and yet most interesting was his PhD dissertation, “The Roman Games as a Survival of an Archaic Year-Cult,”¹ which I could only find in a faded microfiche with white letters on a blue background where Hugh had interspersed typed text with handwritten notes. Although he later expounded on many of the topics from his thesis in detail, Nibley never updated the comprehensive survey matching its scope.

A landmark publication, *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*,² not only reproduced some of his hard-to-obtain articles but also

included an expanded bibliography of Nibley's works. And then the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) began to publish more of his writings. While the relationship between FARMS and Hugh Nibley is better told elsewhere in this volume, the reprints and later the books in the CWHN series made more of them accessible.

My fondness for Nibley's work can be summarized in three main points. First, I am attracted to the breadth and scope with which he approaches a subject. I have always been a big-picture person and approached various topics by trying to read everything I could find out about them. I began my professional career in the field now called cyber-security in the 1980s when it had no formal existence. In those days one could master every aspect of cyber-security. Now, however, it is a field with specialists, and I am one of the few generalists left. At the company where I spent most of my career, over time a few interested individuals evolved into a complex set of organizations of over four hundred people, and my role shifted to one who looked years into the future for the strategies needed to guide the development of technologies and services. I see Hugh Nibley's writing in much the same way—whatever topic he approached, he looked across both space and time, drawing together patterns he observed in different cultures into a systemic whole. In the introduction of his thesis, Nibley gives a description of his general approach to examining the ancient world:

“Parallels” must be more than superficial resemblances which have caught the eye of the investigator in a hasty survey, but if the only assurance against such superficiality is a thorough acquaintance with the whole culture of every field in which one presumes to set foot, the world must forever abandon as inaccessible the great riches which preliminary explorations have promised. But there is an alternative means of attaining to some degree of certainty. If the student confines himself to consideration only of very conspicuous and well-established objects, things thoroughly treated and universally agreed upon, the evidence for which is easily available to all, and if his whole concern is not with symbols or interpretations but with the tangible and objective aspects of every case cited, he may be justified in drawing upon widely-scattered sources. Such precautions do not establish the “validity” of a comparison; it

is a further provision which gives force to the parallels cited in the present study, and which justifies its existence.³

Second, I respect that, in his writings, Nibley never talks down to the reader. To me his works read as a casual but informative conversation between equals, even though we are not equal. He, as stated elsewhere in this volume, assumes that the reader is conversant with his sources and uses that as a starting point for a discussion where he expounds on them more deeply, drawing them together to make a point that the reader may have missed. In spite of his erudition, there is a broad sense of humility in his writings as though he is just trying to help you catch up to something he found that is both interesting and of great significance.

Last, and this may surprise some, is his sense of irony and humor even when covering difficult or sensitive subjects. This appears most often when contrasting the lessons we should learn from the ancient world with the mistakes society never seems to learn. Examples of this appear in “Bird Island,” “The Lessons of the Sixth Century,” “The Christmas Quest,” and *No, Ma'am, That's Not History*, but vignettes of humor and irony appear in almost all of his works, popping up when least expected. While he sometimes directed his humor at those who would attack the Church, he was not averse to pointing out inconsistency in the institutions he was loyal to.

I have focused on Nibley's writings because, unlike the authors of this volume, I did not really know him as a person, nor did I ever hear him speak. I had but one encounter with Hugh Nibley, and that occurred in 1991. The story for that begins in 1978 while I was still going to school at Weber State. During that time I worked on the grounds of the Church's Weber State Institute of Religion and became acquainted with many of their teachers. One afternoon I was discussing Church history with Laurence (Lars) M. Yorgason, and he handed me a 155-page typescript. There was no title or author listed, but the style was unmistakably Nibley's. I made a copy and read the manuscript. It was a detailed study of the Apostasy following the death of the Apostles.

After graduating and moving to the state of Washington, I was called as an early-morning seminary teacher. During that time, Diane (my wife) and I attended a seminary symposium at BYU in

Aug. 13, 1991
 Bro. Whitlock,
 Don't lose that thing,
 There may be something
 in it.
 Hugh Nibley

Figure 1. Nibley's inscription on Whitlock's copy of *The Ancient State*.⁶

1991, and we stayed at the home of Gene England, who lived near the campus. Thinking I could get the manuscript authenticated, I brought it with me and showed it to Gene. He was impressed and suggested that I just call Hugh up and ask him about it. Gene and Hugh were close friends, and Gene had a grand piano in his house that Reid Nibley (Hugh's brother and a neighbor) used to come over and play while Hugh turned the pages of the sheet music. Gene dialed Hugh's home number and handed me the phone, and Phyllis Nibley answered. I told her about the manuscript, and she said her husband was at the BYU library. So I walked from Gene's house over to the library. Before I left, Gene asked me if I would get a copy of the manuscript made for him. He warned me not to give Hugh the original as Hugh would likely misplace it.

When I got to the library, I ended up in a small office occupied by a secretary that had a back door opening into the room where books and records relating to ancient scriptures were kept. I told her that I just wanted a few minutes of Hugh's time to verify that he was indeed the author of a manuscript. She said he was very busy but eventually said I could go in for a few minutes. I went past her and entered the room. There were books in shelves on the walls (among them the *Patrologiae Latinae* and *Graecae*) and a number of long tables. On these tables were spread typed paragraphs and

sections of text of various lengths that Hugh and an assistant were rearranging.

I showed him the manuscript and asked him if he was the author. He got very excited, jumping up and down a bit and bouncing on his toes, and said it was his 1950s New Testament class notes. He thought they were lost forever. He asked if he could get a copy. I had also brought a copy of *The Ancient State*,⁴ and he autographed it, dating it August 13, 1991; he wrote, referring to the manuscript, “Brother Whitlock, Don’t lose that thing! (There may be something in it) Hugh Nibley.”

I left Hugh to his work—he said he was working on a book relating to the Book of Abraham. I went with his secretary to a copy machine where I made three copies—one for Gene, one for Hugh, and one for FARMS. While we were waiting for the copies, his secretary mentioned that he probably had a copy somewhere in his garage or in a box of papers. The next day, I took a copy of the manuscript down to FARMS in their old building in Provo. I can’t remember whom I talked to, but they were nice, thanked me for the manuscript, and said that given its rough state, typed notes, and the handwritten Greek script, it was unlikely they would ever publish it.

Although initially disappointed, a few years later I was pleasantly surprised to see the manuscript published as volume 15 of the CWHN—*Apostles and Bishops in Early Christianity*.⁵ Years later Jack Welch told me that he had discovered the original of this manuscript and shepherded it through publication.

I am grateful for all those who have contributed their thoughts, memories, and other reminiscences about Hugh Nibley to this volume. Although he would never ask for it, I hope it provides a suitable memorial honoring his life and work. And I hope it encourages people to read his body of work.



Figure 2. Steve Whitlock taking photos in the Hugh Nibley Ancient Studies Room, Brigham Young University, under the gaze of Nibley's bust, January 7, 2021.⁷ In addition to his other editorial responsibilities, Steve photographed and edited most of the biographical and historic images used in this book.

Stephen T. Whitlock was the chief strategist for Boeing IT Information Security in Seattle, Washington, until his retirement. With more than twenty-five years of research in information security and cryptography, Whitlock has provided strategic input to numerous global agencies and has served on writing committees for a number of cyber-security organizations and as an industry lead for the Defense Information Base's Technology and Architecture Working Group. Whitlock also served on the Jericho Forum Board of Management and cochaired the Open Group Security Forum. Steve has served in a variety of Church callings, including teaching early-morning seminary for twelve years. He has an interest in the scriptures and the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Steve has a master's degree in software engineering from Seattle University. He and his wife, Diane, currently live in Lindon, Utah.

Notes

1. Hugh W. Nibley, "The Roman Games as a Survival of an Archaic Year-Cult" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1938), iii–iv. According to Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 117n77, "The library at UC Berkeley did not catalogue the work until early 1939."
2. Hugh W. Nibley and Truman G. Madsen, eds., *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978).
3. Nibley, "Roman Games," ii–iii.
4. Hugh Nibley, *The Ancient State* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991).
5. Hugh Nibley, *Apostles and Bishops in Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005).
6. Photo ID: STW-CWHN-Vol10.jpg.
7. Photo ID: IMG_0037-EC.jpg.