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Hugh Nibley Observed

Graduate School through BYU
Alex Nibley

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Recommended Citation

Alex Nibley, "Graduate School through BYU" in Hugh Nibley Observed, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw Shirley S. Ricks, and Stephen T. Whitlock, eds., 77-98. (Orem, UT, and Salt Lake City: The Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2021), <https://interpreterfoundation.org/reprints/hugh-nibley-observed/HNO-07-Graduate-School-through-BYU.pdf>.

GRADUATE SCHOOL THROUGH BYU

Alex Nibley

I'm Charles and I'm Alex. It still confuses my mother. I switched to using my middle name on an airplane going to San Francisco at the age of eighteen. Somewhere over Nevada, I ceased being Charles and became Alex. It's a name my parents gave me, so I saw no problem in using it, but my mother still objects. My topic is Hugh Nibley's career from graduate school to BYU.

So for those of you who are fans and admirers of Hugh Nibley as a scholar, I have to state up front that I am not an expert on Hugh Nibley as a scholar. It's not an aspect of his personality and his career of which I know much; probably many people here know more about him as a scholar than I do. There are others who have the intellect and the inclination and the interest to cover that topic much better than I, and I would certainly recommend you to my brother-in-law Boyd Petersen's biography of Dad, as he has very well researched that and writes about it very well.¹

The second thing I want to say is that I'm going to cover a sensitive topic based on conversations and interviews I had with Hugh Nibley over many years. In the course of writing the book *Sergeant Nibley PhD: Memories of an Unlikely Screaming Eagle*,² I had the opportunity to interview him many times on camera, sometimes with a tape recorder, and sometimes just in private conversation. I think I can safely say that on the subject of his war years, I've had more conversations with him than anybody. And when you say the topic is Hugh Nibley from graduate school to BYU, there's a great gaping ellipsis in the middle of that.

The statement "graduate school to BYU" seems to project a smooth academic career going from one academic institution into another one. But of course, the years between graduate school and

BYU were an entirely different kind of education: the nonacademic education of Hugh Nibley, hence the education of Hugh Nibley that I find interesting. Because as Hugh Nibley went to war, he knew everything about it, except what it was like. And so he was a little bit different kind of warrior. And finally, tonight, I want to try to give you a few stories that maybe you haven't heard before. Maybe you think you've heard a lot; everybody's got a few Nibley stories. And the family policy is that we confirm all rumors.

So everything you've heard is true. All of it. The one about him showing up to class in his pajamas I find particularly marvelous since it would be the only time I think he ever appeared in pajamas anywhere. But the stories are out there.

I'll give you a brief summary of his war experiences. And again, I would refer you to the book that I wrote, if you want to go deeper into it. But in brief, there's a prologue to his war years that begins with his missionary experience. Seventeen years old, he was called as a missionary to Germany, where he went and served in Bavaria and other places in Southern Germany, which at the time was the same place where Nazism as National Socialism was experiencing its foment and its rise.

So not only was he out on the same street corners passing out handbills along with the National Socialists, he also gained during his mission a great appreciation and love for German culture. And he actually wanted to go back to Germany to study in the great universities of Germany and in that great intellectual tradition, which he, and of course the Germans themselves, considered the foundation of all Western civilization, art, and science.

He went back to America after his mission. After that he went through an undergraduate program at UCLA, and then he went to graduate school at Berkeley. And again, I'd refer you to Boyd, who writes better about that than I can. Hugh was at Berkeley from 1934 to 1938, and on completing his doctorate degree there he went to teach at Claremont Colleges. While he was at Berkeley, he made one of the great friendships of his life, a man named Paul Springer who was philosophically very divergent from him, very different.

Paul Springer's background was Prussian, and he had a certain militaristic streak. And this of course was at a time when there was not a clear consensus in the United States as to whose side we ought

to be on in the conflicts in Germany—something that's very easy for us to forget now because the term *Nazi* is now so completely vilified in our minds and raised to a level of absolute evil that we forget there was a time in America when there was considerable doubt and considerable debate about which side we should be on. And Dad and Paul Springer engaged in these debates very vigorously, and they loved it. And they continued debating up until the 1980s.

When Hugh went to Claremont, he was more left-leaning, Paul was very right-leaning, and they continued to trade these letters back and forth. Dad at one point became engaged to a Nazi sympathizer—a German modern dancer—whose family in Germany were in tight with the Third Reich. And had that marriage ever happened, we'd be having a very different conversation right now, if we had any conversation at all. That fell apart, probably to my benefit at least.

And then Pearl Harbor happened, and all of a sudden everything became clear. Now Hugh saw the handwriting on the wall for him at Claremont Colleges. The president of the college whom he admired very much, President Story, died, and the new president who came in told him, "You are not one of us," meaning, "You're a Mormon." So Hugh saw the handwriting on the wall, knew he was going to have to go somewhere. He was thirty-two years old, a PhD, a classics scholar who had read most of the books in the Berkeley library, and who had also been through several years of ROTC in high school. And so he did the obvious thing and went out and enlisted as a buck private in the army.

They sent him to weather school, where he trained as a weatherman. That didn't last long before they picked up on his language abilities and put him into the intelligence service. There had not been an organized intelligence service for the entire US military at that time. There was no such thing as the CIA or any centralized intelligence-gathering force for the entire country. They were beginning to form that at a place called Camp Ritchie, where they threw Dad in along with all kinds of crazy intellectuals and European immigrants, most of them Jews. And it was in that crazy soup that Hugh Nibley was trained in intelligence. He was placed in an elite group called an order of battle team. They were three-man teams,



Figure 1. Nibley's journal for the week of D-Day written in his private shorthand.¹²

the smallest units in the army. And he was sent over to England, and he figured he would be very safe with his highly trained intelligence group of intellectuals analyzing the German order of battle.

He figured he'd be very safe right up until they announced that his team would be attached to the 101st Airborne Division and would be among the first to land in Normandy. So he trained to go into Normandy in the glider attack. Because he was the intelligence master sergeant with the headquarters company of the 101st Airborne, his seat was the number two seat in the number one glider that was to land. Well, a few days before the invasion, General Pratt, who was the assistant division commander, had been begging General Taylor to allow him to go in with the troops in the attack in the glider landing.

So they rearranged things, and General Pratt was given the number two seat in the number one glider, and Hugh was reassigned just a few days before the invasion. After doing all the glider training, he was reassigned to go in, in the sea invasion instead. General Pratt, sitting in Hugh's seat, was killed in the crash. And Dad instead drove a jeep onto Utah Beach on D-Day.

He later on did get to go on a glider attack into Holland, where he participated in the event known as Operation Market Garden.³ You may know it as the *Bridge Too Far* incident. It's interesting, when you research World War II, you'll find lots and lots of books about the Battle of the Bulge. You'll find lots and lots of books about the Battle of Normandy. You won't find a lot of books about the Battle of Holland—because it's a little bit embarrassing. It's not the happiest story from World War II.

Now I got these stories out of my father over a period of many years, interviewing him, nagging him, and annoying him like crazy. I also had all his old letters that he had written to Paul Springer, which were very valuable. I had letters between Hugh and his mother that Boyd had accumulated. And I had some diaries that he kept during the war. Then I also had lots of other accounts of World War II that were written by people who were in the same place at the same time. And I had to cobble all this stuff together to try to form some picture of what actually happened. There were a lot of times when Dad's memory was wrong about little things in the way you would expect them to be wrong. He would tell me about something that happened at Normandy, and I would look at the dates and figure things out and say, "You know what, that really had to have happened in Holland, could not have happened in Normandy." Things like that. But he never told war stories with the big grandiose attitude you might get from Hollywood. And I want to give you an example of that.

I have here diary entries from when he was at Market Garden, when they were in a little village called Veghel in Holland. And he writes,⁴

September 20, 1944: A sticky time. [German] tanks turning up everywhere. Our line is very thin in the 327 [meaning the 327th Glider Infantry Regiment].

September 21: We forage for eggs in farms, Germans trying a big attack on our castle, much shelling and small arms fire all about.

September 25: The roads still cut. We are being heavily shelled. Small arms fire very close on all sides.

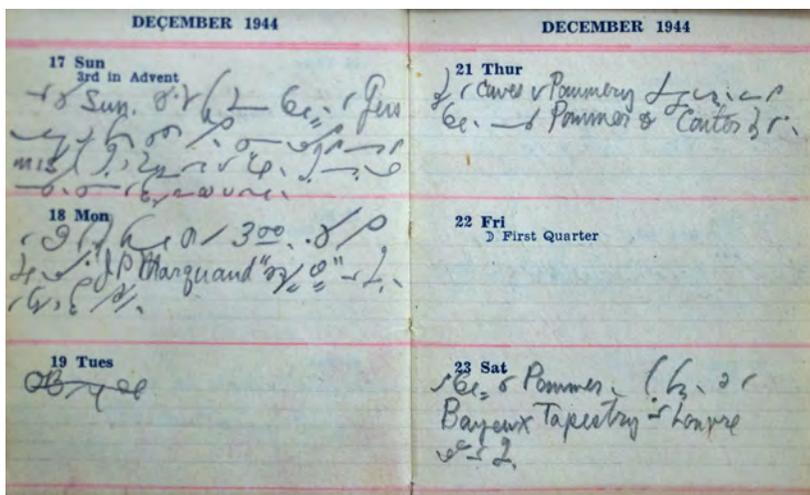


Figure 2. Nibley's journal for the week of December 17, 1944. Note the Saturday entries mentioning the "Bayeux Tapestry" and the "Louvre."¹³

September 26: What a night, much [air] activity during the day. Work with the PWs [prisoners of war]. A lot of running around.

So what he calls "a sticky time," that's about as dramatic as you'll get in his descriptions of a battle. I'm going to read to you here another account of someone who was in Veghel, who could not have been more than a couple of hundred yards away from Hugh Nibley at the most. So he calls it a sticky time. This is how Robert Bowen describes it.

As we neared Veghel, the sound of a major battle greeted us.

We rushed into town among screaming shell bursts which rocked the ground under us, unloading and taking cover on a street of row houses, in doorways or alleys. . . . The artillery fire was deafening, as bad or worse than in Normandy. Several houses in the town were aflame and a great pall of smoke was gathering above. The shells were falling fast and close, no more than 100 yards away. Startled, we huddled against the buildings, waiting for a shell to drop in our midst. It was one of the most terrifying moments of my life. . . .

I crouched in the foxhole, watching the German Shellfire tear Veghel to pieces. Fascinated in a morbid way by the brilliant shell bursts, great palls of smoke and the raging fires as

houses burned. There were people in there, Dutch civilians, American and British troops paying the price for liberation. I thought about our price so far, the deaths of O'Melia and Mazur, both young and eager. . . . O'Melia had been reading his Catholic prayer book minutes before he had been blown apart. It made me wonder. Was it a failed answer to his prayers or a belief in nonsense? I couldn't get it out of my mind as I watched the city burning.⁵

There are a lot of accounts like this that you can find, but the most, like I say, you're ever going to get out of Hugh Nibley was, "It was a sticky time." Reading the descriptions of other people of what was going on taught me a lot about what he must've experienced.

There was a sad day for him a few months later when he was in the town of Mourmelon-le-Grand in France. It was December 17, when word came through that the Germans had broken through the Ardennes woods and were coming through Luxembourg and Belgium. And the 101st was roused out and sent to the battle. On that day, Hugh Nibley was separated from the 101st Airborne and sent to work with the British intelligence, the reason being that there were a lot of fifth columnists, Germans wearing American uniforms and speaking English going around trying to cause confusion and trouble. And so Dad was reassigned to go and focus on finding those guys and dealing with them.

He wrote with sadness about watching the 101st drive away without him. Now, you'll hear him talk in a very disparaging tone sometimes about the military and the men that were in it and about the foolishness of the entire operation. But believe me, I got to the point where I saw hints of nostalgia and also real admiration for the people that he served with. And he felt sad to be separated from the 101st. To the end of his military service, it was the screaming eagle that he wore on his fatigue jacket.

But it was on that day that the 101st was of course sent to the town of Bastogne, where they were surrounded. And there was a horrific battle, and it's very possible Dad may not have survived if he had been sent there. Several times during his career in that order of battle unit, the other two members of the team were killed or wounded, and he was left the only member of the team, operating alone.

After that it was a steamroller as the American army went through and destroyed Germany. If you watch the movies, it was a great moment of triumph. But for Hugh Nibley the fall of Germany was a great moment of sadness as he watched the destruction of a civilization that he admired so much and the people that he had preached to. I remember him telling me once that going door to door with a squad of soldiers and a rifle is much easier than going door to door trying to persuade people to change their lives. The rifle was much more persuasive.

And after the war, he went back to his favorite place on earth, Zion National Park. He tried to go back to LA, but he couldn't stand it there. He borrowed a car, drove up to Hurricane, rented a room, and he walked through Zion for several weeks to cleanse himself from the war.

I asked him once as he was speaking in very disparaging terms about the silliness of all things military, "Dad, did you ever see heroism that you really admired?"



Figure 3. German soldiers in a Nibley photo collection. Context and date unknown.¹⁴

And he said, "Yes, I did, when you take a seventeen-year-old Austrian kid and you interrogate him. You can take the SS guys and they'll break in a minute. They'll tell you more stuff than you want to know. You'll have to try to get them to shut up because they'll keep talking to you. But you take some seventeen-year-old Austrian kid who's just off the farm and doesn't know Hitler from a hole in the ground, and he says, 'You can take me out and shoot me, but I took an oath, and I'm not going to tell you anything!'" He said, "That's true heroism."

I found that interesting, that after having served with some of the most decorated and biggest heroes we know of in American military history, that was his example of great heroism in war.

I'm going to tell you a couple of things I left out of this book in the editing process. One thing that happened when I started reading his early letters was that I found some stuff I didn't want to find. Not just the stuff about being engaged to a Nazi. He had written some letters to Paul Springer, and the letters that they wrote were very intellectual and very caustic—they had that razor wit of Hugh Nibley that was not always a kind wit. And he had some stuff in there that was, by our standards today, certainly racist and some of it strongly anti-Semitic.

One of them was a story where he joked about Joseph Goebbels sending someone to find out Hugh's genealogy in Copenhagen. And when he went to the town hall in Copenhagen, the man who worked there, whom Dad knew, said he was grieved to tell Herr Goebbels that he would have to research Hugh's genealogy in the synagogue. Dad found that very funny, and he joked about the Jews and said at one point, "Don't ever accuse me of being one." Well, of course the joke was on the joker because Hugh knew all along that his own great-grandfather was a Jew. First to convert to Mormonism. First in the Utah Territory. First dentist in the Utah Territory, made Brigham Young's dentures. And Dad knew that.

So my first thought when I came upon these letters was to say, "What? I can't publish that!" And then the second thought immediately after that was, "If I feel that strongly about it, I've got to publish it." So the first draft of the book I did, I put a lot of that stuff in and let it show in all its ugliness. And I read him that version of the manuscript. And he said, "Well, you can't publish that." And I talked to my mom, and actually Mom talked to him and said, "Hugh, that's part of your life, you have to put it out there." And he agreed to let that version of the story be told. I actually cut it back a lot because as I read the manuscript over, I thought it was out of proportion. First of all because that was very much an American attitude at that time. That doesn't excuse it, but those attitudes were much more prevalent, and in the light of our current day, it looks much different than it would have looked back then. But I did want to put that in there because I thought it was significant. So I reduced it a lot, and hopefully I came up with something that was somewhat in proportion. I do think it was an important part of his story because after he went through the war, he was trained

with all those Jews and then was put in teams with all those Jews and watched all those Jews die and get wounded one after another. And then he went to Dachau and saw what was there and what the great country of Germany had done to people who are really his forebears. It changed him.

And he raised me to believe that I must be about 98 percent Jewish, although in reality I'm probably about one thirty-second Jewish. But when he was on his deathbed and I took my newborn daughter, little Isabella, in to meet him, he pointed and said, "That baby is a Jew!" And he meant it as a compliment. This is one of the reasons I believe the war was the greatest educational experience of Hugh Nibley's life, because it educated him not as an academic but as a human being.

Before he went into battle, his assignment with the 101st Airborne was to teach all the officers the history of warfare and particularly the history of German warfare and German strategy and tactics. And he did his homework, and he came in with these lectures, and all the officers had to sit there and listen to this sergeant lecture them. And, as I say, he knew everything about war except what it was like. And anybody who's been there—and I have not, which is one of the things that really gave me pause in writing a book about warfare—but any combat veteran knows that anybody who has spent ten minutes in combat knows more about the reality of war than somebody who has a PhD in book learning about warfare.

I'll give you another example of something I left out of the book. There were a few times Dad had told this story. He told it to me, and he had told it in public. And it's out there on the public record in some places. He talks about this guy, Colonel Cole, who he says was a crazy hothead and led one of the only bayonet charges ever conducted in World War II. And then, he said Colonel Cole got crazy drunk when they were in Holland and decided he was going to go over with a company of men and take the town of 's-Hertogenbosch. And he was fond of talking about what a crazy guy this Colonel Cole was.

Well, Colonel Cole may have been a hothead, he may have been a drinker, I don't know, but there's a lot that I have found out about Colonel Cole after that. First of all, the bayonet charge that he led

probably saved an enormous number of lives. It was done under extreme duress, and he was exposing himself to fire, picking people up out of the ditches and saying, “Don’t stay here, you’re going to die! Run, charge! You have to do it because it’s the only way we’re going to get out of here alive!” although many of them died in the process. He was awarded the Medal of Honor for leading that, what Hugh Nibley called, crazy charge.

Well, that’s not why I left it out, because you can be a hero, a certifiable real hero, and still be a jerk, right? We know that’s a possibility. But then it was the story of the death of Colonel Cole that I decided to cut. I went to Dad and told him I was going to remove that story because I read several different eyewitness accounts of the death of Colonel Cole, and nobody said he was drunk. He was certainly not leading a company of men off to take the town of ’s-Hertogenbosch. He was in a field, and he was cut down by a sniper as he and fellow soliders were trying to help some other men who had been hit by snipers. Again, I attributed it to an error in his memory that he may have gotten some events confused, he may have gotten different people confused, but I said, “Dad, this disagrees so much with the eyewitness accounts I’ve read that I don’t think it’s fair to Colonel Cole. And I don’t think it’s fair to his family to say that he died as a drunken fool.” And he agreed with me, and we took that story out.

Something that I think maybe people don’t understand about Hugh Nibley is how much he valued disagreement. And this is a subject on which I can speak with some authority because I probably disagreed with him more vehemently and more often than anybody, except probably my mom. I had more headbutting with Hugh Nibley probably than anybody else. I remember well the first time. I told mom that I was resigning from family home evening. I didn’t want to go anymore. Well, our family home evening consisted of a lot of foreign athletes coming over to sit at the feet of Hugh Nibley while he talked about whatever he’d been writing that week and proofread—basically he’d proofread and read his stuff out loud. And a lot of students would make pilgrimages to come too. So I said, “Come on, I’m tired of this.” And Mom said, “Well, you’re going to have to tell your father.” Okay, I was seventeen years old. I said, “Dad, I’m not coming to family home evening anymore.



Figure 4. Filming *Faith of an Observer in Egypt*.
Hugh and Alex at far right, January 1984.¹⁵

I don't like it. It doesn't seem like it's about the family, and I don't want to come anymore."

And I saw a look on his face that I had never seen before and didn't really recognize at the time. And it didn't register until many years later when I had my own children, because it had never occurred to me that Hugh Nibley could be hurt by something I said.

Later, I did a lot of interviews for *Faith of an Observer*.⁶ It's a long story, and Jack Welch deserves a lot more credit for that movie than he ever got. It started out with conversations between me and him about how we were going to do it. He wanted to really do something right, something special, spend \$4,000 or \$5,000 and really do a first-class job. Well, I said we should get Sterling Van Wagenen involved. And so we got Sterling. And, as most projects do, it grew beyond all proportion or reason.

We wanted to present Hugh Nibley as he appeared to us. Up until that time, Hugh Nibley had gained a reputation as a writer and a lecturer, but I knew, and my coconspirator Sterling Van Wagenen knew, another side to him: Hugh Nibley the conversationalist. We wanted to present Hugh Nibley as he appeared in more casual conversations, when he would speak at length, impromptu and not in a public forum. In the days of the great salons of Paris, conversation

was considered a fine art, and Hugh Nibley was a wonderful conversationalist, and that's what we wanted the public to see. We knew that it was going to be a trick to capture that, and we spent a lot of time and effort to figure out how to do it. The strategy that we decided on we called "wildlife photography," and it consisted of several elements, many of which made a lot of people who are used to different kinds of documentary production believe that I didn't know what I was doing, which of course I didn't.

But one thing I did know was that if you sat my father down in front of a microphone and a camera and let him loose he would take over, start playing the part of a scholar, and start lecturing, and that's what we didn't want. So here's what we did. At my request, two large sound baffles were placed as walls with a narrow crack, a few inches wide between them, and the camera and cinematographer were hidden behind these walls where Dad couldn't see them. Then I asked for extra lighting placed on me and Sterling, who were going to do the interviewing. When the crew pointed out that there was no need to place extra lighting on us because the camera would never see us, I said, "Yes, but *he* will see *us*, and we want to minimize the feeling that we're on a set and he is doing a performance."

Sterling and I went over in advance what we wanted to get in the interviews and worked out a plan for double-teaming him. Sterling, whose intellect Dad respected (he didn't respect mine, with good reason), would draw him out on philosophical and intellectual questions, and my job was to look for opportunities to get him to speak about aspects of his personal life and his family. Then we scheduled four-hour time blocks for the interviews. Now Dad would arrive for interviews, as we expected he would, with prepared materials, and he would proceed to do what we also expected him to do, which was to ignore our questions, dominate the discussions and take them exactly where he wanted them to go.

What I consider the greatest blessing my father ever gave me is that he never ever in his life gave me a straight answer to a question. In his own way, what he kept saying was, "Go look it up." I'd ask a question, and he'd say, "I've got a book on that."

"Well, Dad, in what language is the book?" Well, you'll have to learn the language first, but then you can look it up. Well, in a

formal interview session it reached its apotheosis. So what did we do? We ran him down like a pack of wolves chasing an old bull moose. We let him run for an hour or two, and eventually he'd start to get tired, and he would run out of prepared material and start wandering. And then we would move in for the kill.

We also lied to him a lot. We would tell him that the camera was reloading, and he would say, "Now don't film this, but . . ." And we would assure him none of this was going to be in the film. "The camera's not rolling anyway, so yeah, tell us the real stuff, we'll get back to the interview later." And then we'd get some interesting stuff.

We came up with several different scripts and outlines for the movies, and they all had two things in common. One is that none of them bore any resemblance to the finished piece, and all of them included an absolute necessity that we had to go to Egypt to film. We came up with a lot of different reasons the school really needed to send us to Egypt.

What Jack Welch originally conceived of as an interview piece that we should really do nicely had grown beyond all recognition. We believed that the movie would be mostly about Dad's work on that artifact of Egyptiana known as the hypocephalus. After a week in Egypt, talking about this hypocephalus in various abstruse conversations at the pyramids of Giza and in many locations in the Cairo Museum, we realized that in every conversation we had assumed the listener already knew what a hypocephalus was, which was not really a safe assumption.

We found that out when we were in the Cairo Museum trying to locate the collection of hypocephali, which we knew was there somewhere, but which we couldn't find. It's not a small building—there's a whole lot of Egyptian stuff there. So we told the staff we were looking for hypocephali, and they looked at us as though we were from some other country speaking a foreign language, which of course we were. Finally I produced a copy of the Pearl of Great Price and showed them Facsimile 2. And they nodded their heads and said, sure, they could take us to a bunch of these, and where did I get that book, and what exactly *is* that book?

So we found the hypocephali, but we still had no definition on film to tell the audience of our film what we were talking about.



Figure 5. Notes of Hugh Nibley on a hypocephalus.¹⁶

We needed a shot of Hugh Nibley saying a hypocephalus is a small circular object of metal or clay or papyrus placed under the head of a mummy and inscribed with hieroglyphics. Now that's all we needed. So we set up the shot in our hotel room, and Sterling said to him, "So can you tell us simply what a hypocephalus is?" And he said, "Well, to understand that, first you must know what a hypocephalus is *not*." And he was off for an hour, and we never got a clear statement of what a hypocephalus was. That's what it's like to interview Hugh Nibley.

I'm going to tell you another story that I don't think anybody here has heard before. When I was going to receive my endowments, I was living in San Francisco, and Dad came out to take me through the Oakland, California Temple. I was living at the time with a roommate from Pakistan named Ali, who had just joined the Church. Now this excited Dad a lot. And he told the two of us, "By joining the Church, Ali has not given up Islam. He will be a better Muslim for having joined the Church because, of course, Jesus is the greatest prophet of Islam next to Muhammad."

And I was a little skeptical, and I said, Dad, I've read a little of the Qur'an, and this whole "son of God" thing doesn't really go over well with the Muslims. And his answer was a shrug as if to say, "Oh that. Well . . . that . . ." These are little clues about his relationship to conflict and a lot of the polarized headbutting that we see going on in the world today. And now he went on to tell my roommate, who was unclear about this whole temple business, "Today, Alex is going to become a haji."

That's the first time I had heard that word. But Dad explained to me that it means one who had accomplished one of the great pillars of Islam and made his holy pilgrimage to Mecca and been initiated into the inner circle of his faith. Now he gave me that title of haji with love and respect, and my roommate understood instantly what he meant. Now he knew why I was going to the temple.

As you know, every war spawns its own racial and nationalistic epithets. In World War II, Hugh Nibley watched the race of Beethoven and Goethe turned into "krauts" and "Jerries," words that drip with hatred and were used to inspire men to destroy and kill. And now *haji* means something else. One definition from the urban dictionary is "offensive slang, disparaging term for Arabs, especially those of Islamic faith, first used by US military forces during the early stages of 2000, the Iraq invasion."

Hugh Nibley believed that differences in philosophy and belief were not only inevitable but strengthening. I think that's one thing a lot of people don't understand, that he cared more about the people who disagreed with him than he cared about what he might've called the stupidity of their ideas. I saw him treat many ideas very harshly, but I never saw him treat a person harshly just because he had a stupid idea, although sometimes it may have felt that way. I'm going to give you an example of that, and again, these are stories that you may not have heard before.

There were actually times later on when Dad's political beliefs and the things that he said in public got him in trouble. And actually there were threats made against our family, and this is something I don't think has ever been exposed in public. My parents kept it quiet, but that was something that was going on.

Dad had a dual career. One was as an apologist for the Church, and the other was what Truman Madsen called being the gadfly



Figure 6. Nibley speaking at 1983 BYU Summer Commencement.¹⁷

critic of BYU and Latter-day Saint culture. Now, remember, this is not just the guy who wrote *No, Ma'am, That's Not History*.⁷ This is the guy who, when he was still quite young, before he was “Hugh Nibley!” when he was asked to give the opening prayer—and you all know this story, right?—at the BYU commencement exercises, he gets up and says, “Father, we stand here garbed in the black robes of the false priesthood to heap upon us the honors of men.”⁸ He said that.

That was the gadfly critic. Now, there have been good scholars that have come along to take up the torch of apologist for the Church. There are scholars who read the languages pretty much as well as he did. They may not be as imaginative, but they’re probably more careful in some of their scholarship. But who’s ready to stand before God and invoke his presence pointing out that the speaker himself and all his colleagues are dressed in the black robes of the false priesthood, meeting together in a festival of vanity to heap upon them the honors of men? Note that he used the first person pronoun: “We stand here . . .” He did not exclude himself nor excuse himself. He himself wore the black robe, but he was also able to see the irony in what he was doing and point it out. So who now is ready to pick up that torch?

Hugh Nibley knew a lot about vanity because he was an extraordinarily vain man. If you don't believe me, then you don't believe his own words. I remember well the conversation we had about his grandfather Charles W. Nibley, who was the Presiding Bishop of the Church and second counselor to Heber J. Grant, and at one time, reputedly, the richest man in Utah. I said to Dad that I could identify with Great-Grandpa Nibley's driving ambition. I felt haunted by a similar drive myself, although I never made it work like Grandpa did. We're walking along at the time, and Dad turned to me and he said, "Ambition was never my problem, it was vanity."

What, did you all think that he wore those funny clothes because he didn't care? You missed it. He cared too much, and he knew it. His was not the peacock vanity of the Sun King strutting in silk and lace in front of the portrait artist. His was the hair-shirt vanity of Thomas à Becket. As a teenager he had been too arrogant to help his brother wash dishes, a story my sister Zina told in her lecture on Dad. But I remember him countless times going to work in the welfare cannery. And I remember going out with him to hoe beets at the stake welfare farm. Does that mean he wasn't vain? No, it means he understood his own tendency toward vanity and made a conscious decision to work against it. Sometimes he was successful; sometimes he wasn't, and the vanity showed through the rumpled secondhand hair shirts.

But in my mind, a recognition of one's own vanity is the best possible definition of humility. A paradox? Yes. And not the only one that you will find in the personality of Hugh Nibley. It was Carl Gustav Jung who said paradox is the essence of religion. The act of binding again, tying back together that which was broken to make what was fractured once more "at one" is a process that always involves bringing together inimical opposites. Whether one accepts Jung's ideas or not, this notion of the importance of paradox is a useful way to understand Hugh Nibley. It was Truman Madsen again who said, "Is he a cynic and a pessimist with all kinds of negative things to say? Yes. Is he an optimist and idealist with great hope for the future? Yes. Some say you can't get those together. He does."⁹

What are some of Hugh Nibley's other paradoxes? He was a deadly serious comic, something that got him in trouble sometimes



Figure 7. Alex Nibley speaking at the Nibley Centennial Lecture Series, 18 February 2010.¹⁸

because people thought he was joking when he was serious and thought he was serious when he was joking. He spent decades learning languages, the purpose of which is to communicate, and in more languages than anyone else around, he was almost completely incapable of human communication. He was a dignified buffoon, he was an erudite ignoramus, he was an infantile sage, he was a childlike old man, he was a chauvinist feminist, he was an ecumenical sectarian who defended his religion with great energy but would never denigrate another person for showing similar devotion to a different sect. He was a nondogmatic apologist, he was weak as a lily that bends in the breeze and powerful as a mighty river that carves its way through a continent. He was an emotionally detached man of pure passion. He gained a large following without ever exercising leadership. He was fearless in the face of death and trembled in terror at the most intense moments of life. The armies of the Third Reich held little terror for him because they could only kill his body, but the love of a child could wound his soul. So a laughing baby held more terror for him than battalions of SS troops and all their demonic hardware. He was a

pacifist warrior. You can go on. You can make your own list of all the paradoxes that encompassed Hugh Nibley's life.

I want to read one last thing from the ending of my book. This comes after the story that is told from the transcripts of the Nuremberg trial of an SS guard who murders a Jewish family who are standing naked, huddled together. It was a part of the book that I had to type only once and let the proofreaders deal with it after that because it was simply too painful for me to proofread. I won't read that description to you, but following that, it says this—and here again is the paradox.

Is it possible a picture so hideous and painful can be such a beautiful portrait of human love and dignity? As I read this, I think of what Hugh Nibley said about war and the way he lived and I asked myself: given my choice, would I rather be the SS guard or a member of that loving family going to their death? Is it only in the face of death that we come to understand life? Is it possible to find peace in the battlefield? Is the man who sings the beautiful "Der Lindenbaum" in a state of war? Is it possible for a soldier to renounce war even as he obeys his officers and shoots at the enemy?

Renounce war? Give no thought for what we will eat or wear? It makes no sense. But remember, his was a private war. His declaration was not political any more than was Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). The most important thing to him was not the political position on war, but a personal spiritual stance on what it all means. He hated war and volunteered to fight. The objective was not to take himself out of the war, but to take the war out of himself.

Victor Frankl says, "What we really needed [in the concentration camps] was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that *it did not really matter what we expected of life, but rather what life expected from us*. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."¹⁰

And the final quote from Hugh Nibley himself. “I remember the dream I had in the foxhole outside Carentan. The one where Dave Bernay woke me up and I felt so happy because it was just a dream and I hadn’t actually committed the terrible crime I had dreamed about. There I was in the middle of a battle, and I was completely happy. It came to me very strongly: I shouldn’t be *happy* in this circumstance! But it’s not what happens to you that matters. It’s not what becomes of you, it’s what you become that’s important.”¹¹

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Notes

1. Boyd Jay Petersen. *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2002).
2. Hugh Nibley and Alex Nibley, *Sergeant Nibley PhD: Memories of an Unlikely Screaming Eagle* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 2006).
3. Glider losses were tragically heavy. Hugh learned that at least some of this was due to the drunken state of the men who assembled them in England. Nibley, *Sergeant Nibley*, 166–67, 286–87.
4. Nibley, *Sergeant Nibley*, 177.
5. Nibley, *Sergeant Nibley*, 177–78.
6. Hugh Nibley, “The Faith of an Observer: Conversations with Hugh Nibley,” in *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 148–76. <http://www.bhporter.com/Hugh%20Nibley/The%20Faith%20of%20an%20Observer%20Conversations%20with%20hugh%20Nibley.pdf>. For the film itself, see Sterling Van Wagenen (producer), Brian Capener (writer, director, and photographer), and Alex Nibley (writer), *The Faith of an*

- Observer: Conversations with Hugh Nibley* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2004), DVD and YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYPVZvRXpIY>.
7. Hugh W. Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History: A Brief Review of Mrs. Brodie's Reluctant Vindication of a Prophet She Seeks to Expose* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946); reprinted in Hugh Nibley, *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass: The Art of Telling Tales about Joseph Smith and Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 1–45
 8. See Hugh Nibley, "Leaders to Managers: The Fatal Shift," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 491. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jxjZXAd300>.
 9. Nibley, "Faith of an Observer," 149.
 10. Nibley, *Sergeant Nibley*, 340. Quote from Frankl is from Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), 98.
 11. Nibley, *Sergeant Nibley*, 340.
 12. Petersen Collection, box 3, folder 2. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-_STW8167-EC-Box3Folder2.jpeg. For more on the battle of Normandy, see Nibley, *Sergeant Nibley*, 100–147.
 13. Petersen Collection, box 3, folder 2. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-_STW8169-EC-Box3Folder2.jpeg. For more on the events of the week, see Nibley, *Sergeant Nibley*, 218–231.
 14. Sometimes American soldiers wore German uniforms for intelligence training. Though it is certainly possible, we wonder whether a group of American soldiers would have displayed a portrait of Adolf Hitler honorifically, as shown here. For the same reason it seems unlikely to have been a photograph of prisoners of war. Chris Miasnik suggests that the stacked shovels may be part of a practice drill for stacking rifles. See Nibley, *Sergeant Nibley* 63. Nibley Collection, box 293, folder 23. Photo ID: HBLL-HughN-_STW8528-EC-Box293Folder23.jpeg. For more on the battle of Normandy, see Nibley, *Sergeant Nibley*, 100–147.
 15. See Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 375. Petersen Collection, box 10, folder 1. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-_STW8587-EC-Box10Folder1.jpeg.
 16. Nibley Collection, box 291, folder 33. Photo ID: HBLL-HughN-_STW8504-IMGP5044-S.jpg. The original item in the Hugh W. Nibley Collection contains a photo of Louvre Hypocephalus #3526 surrounded by Nibley's notes. However the photo of the hypocephalus was not very clear, partly due to the red chalk outlining on the original hypocephalus, so a photo of the same hypocephalus taken by Stephen T. Whitlock on 21 April 2007 was superimposed for clarity. The nameplate in the Louvre identifies the item as Hypocéphale d'Irethorrou N 3526.
 17. See BYU Speeches YouTube channel, Leaders and Managers, Hugh Nibley, 1983. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jxjZXAd300>.
 18. See the BYU Maxwell Institute YouTube channel, Alex Nibley, "Graduate School through BYU," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxOgseAERYI>.