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The Influence of Hugh Nibley: His Presence in the University

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The verbal bookkeeping that is often useful in presenting complex people is hopelessly ineffective in giving a balanced account of Hugh Nibley. To begin with, on which side of the ledger do we post his glorious absent-mindedness? Dental appointments missed may be a liability, but a mind unfettered by circumstance is an asset most of us envy. What appear to be contradictions in others turn out to be complements in him. He is *sui generis* and therefore not subject to a normal audit.

If analysis of Hugh as a person is unfruitful, consideration of him as a *presence* is an overwhelming experience. In the first place, a presence may take on a mythic aura appropriately, and there is little doubt but that the friends and students who have been part of the penumbra that has surrounded his intense scholarly activity during the last quarter-century have been stimulated beyond expectation and have never really lost the glow they first felt in attending him.

Yet he has never been a model to be followed, and he has not stopped long enough for disciples to line up in back of him. The enduring fact of his presence at BYU has been threat, comfort, goad, and — especially — conscience

Presented in honor of Hugh Nibley on his sixty-fifth birthday in the Varsity Theater, Brigham Young University, in connection with the 1975 Annual Welch Lecture Series by Klaus Baer and others in tribute to Dr. Nibley.

to his colleagues. The unembodied, internal conscience that whispers to each would-be scholar that his effort is imperfect may be lulled by rationalization – who has not cooled his intellectual ardor in the present by promises of massive exertion in the future? – but there is something so impelling about those note cards, rubber-banded, boxed, or simply splayed on the lectern in front of Hugh Nibley, that makes the dullest of us flush with scholarly resolve.

Usual academic research is attended by some risks. One may choose to analyze and interpret areas that are so large or complex that early evidence of success is not possible, and one may know years of lonely, silent eloquence while research comes to fruition. Another may know the frustration of having his best efforts nullified by the work of those who bring to successful conclusion the experiments he is still engaged in.

But no research is so difficult as that undertaken to investigate religious positions. While no researcher begins without bias – whatever the object of his exploration – the temptation to emphasize evidence that supports his theological belief may be irresistible for the religious scholar. The deep emotional reinforcement that commitment to particular doctrines provides will usually seep through the chinks in the most objective prose. The problem is not that this occurs – as indicated above, anyone with a hypothesis experiences the same difficulty. The peculiar temptation of the religious researcher is coming to believe that the theological tenets he accepted on faith are, after he has written about them, the result of his work. When this happens, what began, modestly, as investigation becomes justification, and discussion degenerates into contention. A position may be controversial without being contentious. The controversial scholar is not uncommon, but the contentious scholar is a contradiction in terms. There is presumption in contentious assertion that is simply incompatible with honest inquiry.

While acknowledging his religious beliefs, Hugh Nibley has avoided theological stances that go beyond the fundamental position of his Church. He enjoys the give and take of doctrinal debate, and in his hands the familiar, personal letter becomes an unusually effective instrument by which to comment on opposing views. However brisk some of these letters have become—for Hugh can't resist exploiting an obvious opening—his sense of proportion never fails him. He is always the classical satirist.

As often happens when one person exhibits the qualities that many would have, there has been a tendency on the part of some to equate presence with resource. Hugh has been expected to silence opposition with continuing, stunning discoveries and insights—even though the positions he is expected to support may be no more than the personal whim of those who attempt to use him as crutch, club, or mantle. A lesser man might have retreated into cynicism, or into the completely esoteric where the foolish could not follow, but Hugh has patiently corrected, carefully restated—and smiled when his simplest explanation has still been distorted.

An insistence on the significance of patterns keeps Nibley scholarship tentative when the key piece to a historical or scriptural puzzle seems to be found. Wry comments about his own fallibility are never simply the graceful disclaimers of arrogance. His most persistent critics are not so skillful as Hugh himself in identifying and pricking the pretensions that could develop during the course of his work. The reach of his mind is such that the synthesis the Book of Mormon calls “a compound in one”—which is so difficult for most of us to pull together—is his natural mode. He follows implications that a less discriminating mind would lose in the limbo of fragmentary source and dubious translation that are the materials he must use. What Coleridge called the *esemplastic* process, the ability to project new entities that combine evidence in different

and persuasive ways, distinguishes a Nibley reading and is the bane of those who prefer to echo traditional interpretations.

The confidence with which Hugh presents a point of view is his compliment to an idea that deserves the most convincing context he can supply for it. No perceptive hearer mistakes this for the assurance with which the earnest amateur often chooses to speak. Failure to fit necessary patterns will check overstatement; other scholars will refute, refine, or extend, but that most fragile of human creations—a synthesizing concept—will get its chance to survive under optimal conditions.

The full influence of Hugh Nibley on other members of the faculty over the years is not easy to gauge. The affectionate respect with which his colleagues viewed him allowed the singular role he chose to play. We were always proud of him but not anxious to pull him away from “the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome” to the modesty that was Provo. Yet his was never a repudiating isolation; his single-mindedness was not achieved at the cost of rejecting the interests of his friends. Whatever one’s academic concern, it took on freshness and stature under the quickening impulse of a conversation with Hugh. Even the malaise of general faculty meetings was routed by his trenchant—and always sprightly—comment.

To fellow faculty members who feared lest humble resources and heavy teaching loads fatally compromise significant research at BYU, Hugh was answer and inspiration. His relentless demand for documents gave impetus to the building of collections that could approximate his expectations—and in so doing raised the aspirations of the entire library.

Few students can talk coherently about their first class from Brother Nibley. For some it was simply a rite of passage, the academic equivalent of a social-unit initiation.

For many it was, at best, a brisk blur edged with random flashes of insight. For a few it was an intellectual implosion, from which they will never recover. For after one has stood in the presence of his first true scholar the world loses a bit of its apparent symmetry, reveals the forces that determined its form and invites an infinite recasting. Never does one's agency seem so unlimited—yet the scholarly life is curiously impersonal, almost abstract. It isn't really possible to know the person who inspires our scholarly activity. One can hardly send a thank-you note to Prometheus. But one can acknowledge the electric force that is generated when a potentially good mind rubs against a great one.

Hugh has assumed the ultimate hazard of scholarly research—the popularization of technical material—without obvious discomposure, and he is equally serene under the critical review of his peers. He has won, and kept, the confidence of General Authorities of the Church, and he holds the titles of husband and father with distinction. In the easy parlance of the day, he has “put it all together.” For as Thomas DeQuincey observed: “A great scholar, in the highest sense of the term, is not one who depends simply on an infinite memory, but also on an infinite . . . power of combination; bringing together from the four winds, like the Angel of the Resurrection, what else were dust from dead men's bones, into the unity of breathing life.”