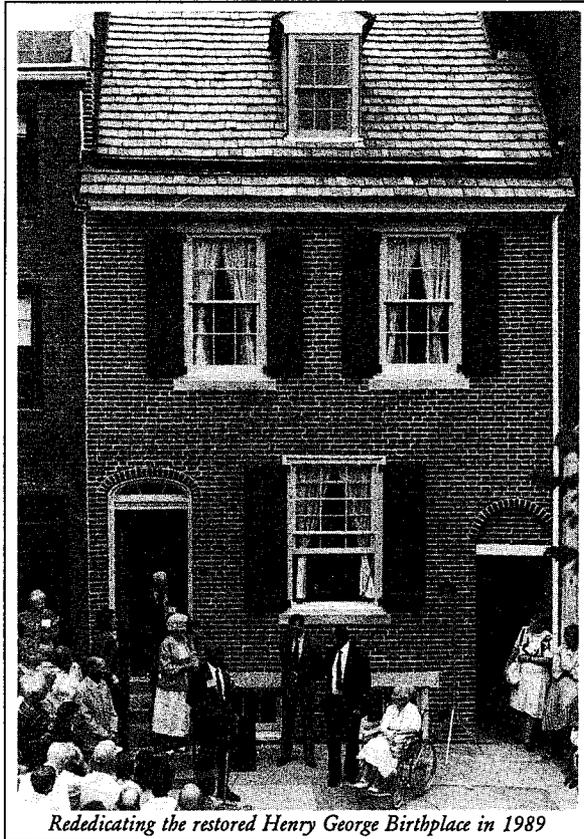


A Complete Agnes

By George Collins

Except perhaps for the dance, nothing engaged Agnes de Mille's interest as did the philosophy of her grandfather. She was committed to it. She was a Georgist. The stories she has told of being dragged by her mother to Georgist meetings and conferences when she was a child might have been

George Birthplace Museum in Philadelphia for twenty-five years. Agnes was the Chairwoman of the Birthplace Committee, an essentially honorary position. But she did not take it lightly. She originally provided the major artifacts that are on display, adding other items through the years. She persuaded her good friend, the famous Black opera and concert artist Marian Anderson, herself a Philadelphian, to become a member of the Birthplace Committee. She was extraordinarily pleased



Rededicating the restored Henry George Birthplace in 1989

expected to produce an adult with a strong aversion to a force-fed prescription for an idealized world. That is a reaction frequently observed by many Georgists who have despaired at the disinterest shown by their own children and family.

But Agnes survived that auspicious baptism to become a link for us in the unbroken line of contact with a person, a personality and presence that was a major force in the world. Whether or not personal appreciation of George, the man, is seen by some as redolent deification, it remains a truth, I believe, that as earnestly striving human beings we are elevated toward the best in ourselves when we feel a kinship to greatness. Anyone who has ever experienced the pride of ancestry or origin knows the sentiment.

Agnes revered the memory of her grandfather. I had the extraordinary privilege of being the Curator of the Henry

when the Birthplace won landmark status with a listing in the National Registry of Historic Places in 1984. She was with us for its original dedication in 1957 when the School acquired the building and she was with us to celebrate its rededication in 1989 after restoration to its original architecture - that of the 1830s, when Henry George was born.

Of course, she was more than a sentimental preserver of memorabilia. The economic and social philosophy of Henry George was her creed. She spoke and wrote of it in vivid cadences, proclaiming the validity of the analysis and urgency of the reform. It was not her field. She was an artist - among the best this country has produced. But she shared with George the gift wherein words were not just the tools of communi-

cation but jewels in their elegant renderings of emotions and ideas.

It might seem that it would be easy from someone of Agnes's prominence to take the Georgist movement much farther along the way to acceptance than it has gone. It might be thought that she could translate her celebrity into public, or at least influential support for a principle that she so strongly espoused. Things, however, are all too often unlike what we think them to be.

She served and worked in all the ways that she could from the earliest years of her professional importance. In 1949 she organized and danced in what was described as a "Star-studded Recital" for the benefit of the Henry George School. She was a member of the Board of Trustees for twenty-four years, continuing after her (continued on page six)

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crippling stroke until her resignation in 1977. During all that period and since, she has appeared and spoken at functions and conferences. How many times there were that I personally knew she had called to have quantities of books sent to her which would be distributed to friends and acquaintances. Over the last four years I visited her often. She would invite me to lunch, and our conversation would always include a discussion of who among her acquaintances, persons in the spotlight or with clout, she might get to listen if she invited them to lunch. At this stage she rarely went out. Rehearsals and revivals of her dances and Henry George functions were her main excursions.

Among the people we had spoken about was Bill Moyers. Then earlier this year she called to say that Moyers was going to

tape an interview with her, to be aired in 1994, and she wanted to be briefed: how many cities in Pennsylvania and how they are doing; what about Denmark these days; Australia; the Russian initiative. On the day of the interview, she called again for a last-minute brushup. But, the subject never came up in the interview; they ran out of time. Even Bill Moyers goes first with what sells best: in her case, the dance.

Agnes was disappointed at not getting more people like Bill Moyers to respond over the years. But she was always hopeful that her next quarry would think and act. She was keenly interested in what was taking place in Russia. In 1992 she came to the reception at the School given for the Russian economists who came to study with us. She had several of them at her home for cocktails and had even offered to house someone if needed. Each time we spoke or met she wanted to know the latest develop-

ments - who was now in Russia, what kind of reception they were receiving, and what was currently being done.

I last saw her in August. She was excited about the legislation in New York allowing Amsterdam to adopt LVT. Her appreciation was such that she made an additional contribution to the

School, putting a check in my hand then and there. I wrote her on August 11th, welcoming her back from the coun-



At the dedication of the Henry George Tree in Central Park, October, 1945: Agnes de Mille, Lawson Purdy, Albert Pleydell, and Anna George de Mille

try and inviting her to the Henry George Day celebration of September 2nd. She could not come. She sent flowers. On the 9th, she called to say she was sending me a batch of Henry George signatures. "Take care of these," she said, "they are the last." I'm sure she meant they were the last in her possession.

Agnes used her talent and status in the service of our cause as she was able. If more could have been done she would have done it. But she was not just an icon of the Georgist movement and an artist of world renown. She was a wife, a mother and a grandmother. She was good with words and she did not mince them. She would tell you precisely what she thought, favorable or unfavorable, in private or in public. And although I came to know her best in the last few years, that propensity was clearly not the privilege of age but an element of character. She loved her flower garden in Merriwald and regretted no longer being able to tend and enjoy it, but with no sense of self-pity and no invitation to sympathy. She liked camembert cheese, hearts of palm was a favorite at lunch and she enjoyed strawberries and cream with dark brown sugar for dessert. I'll remember a complete Agnes.