

Agnes de Mille Recalls Henry George 'Presence'

By THOMAS LASKSEPT. 25, 1979 / The New York Times

HENRY GEORGE, the political economist whose famous study "Progress and Poverty" is 100 years old this year, may have been a prophet of a new order to many of his readers, but to his grandchild, the distinguished dancer and choreographer Agnes de Mille, who will preside over a reception opening a display of his memorabilia tomorrow night, he was more than an illustrious ancestor; he was a palpable presence though he died before she was born.

"He was an enormous presence," Miss de Mille said, reminiscing in her Greenwich Village apartment the other afternoon. "My mother was flaming with it. Mother taught Georgists. Every political economist who was in the city stopped in for tea. Karl Marx's daughter came. They stood like two she tigers — these daughters — facing each other.

"I was taken to my first Single Tax convention about the time of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915 in San Francisco when I was a little girl, and had to listen to a lot of speeches. The next convention was in Denmark, and there there were more speeches, in Danish and other foreign languages."

'Land Belongs to the People'

Miss de Mine's mother, Anna George de Mine, Henry George's youngest daughter, later wrote a life of her father, whose single-tax idea called for collecting all tax revenue from a levy on the value of land and other natural resources.

Miss de Mille said she never imposed her views on anyone, having let even her son Jonathan, a professor of history, come to the book on his own. She is of course acquainted with Georgist doctrine, which she summarized as: "Land and all natural resources belong to the people. What each person makes should belong to him." She quoted an aphorism from her grandfather: "He who makes should have. He who saves should enjoy." Labor would not be taxed, Miss de Mille said, but where there is a natural monopoly, the benefits should accrue to the people.

She added that some of Henry George's teachings were having practical results in such places as Alberta, Canada, which is trying to control the exploitation of its natural resources; in the declaration last August by the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial

Organizations that the oil companies be nationalized, and in the attitude of some urban-renewal people in their view of land.

“Progress and Poverty” is a book that in the words of Rexford Tugwell, the New Deal economist, offered “a simple program of reform to the harassed world” in “inspired style” and “with passionate eloquence.” And it persuaded incipient Fabians such as George Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb to socialist positions. For the centenary the New York Public Library is having a special showing: a sampling of its Henry George collection, one of the most extensive in the country. In addition, tomorrow there will be the reception at which Miss de Mille will preside.

Letters Are on Display

New York, incidentally, is not the only city to celebrate the centennial. Miss de Mille had just returned from Philadelphia, which arranged a dinner and assorted speeches, all of which Miss de Mille said were “well done.” Philadelphia, birthplace of the writer, now has a Henry George School, and Miss de Mille donated to it some family heirlooms, including embroidered pictures and the four-poster mahogany bed in which her grandfather was born.

The exhibition at the Public Library includes letters to and from Henry George, the hand-written manuscript of “Progress and Poverty,” a copy of the first edition of it and a copy of its centennial edition and a bust of the author. The selections call up the young man, who went to sea as a young man, as well as the newspaper editor, the candidate for public office in California and New York and the crusading figure he later became.

In one letter, dated 1856, he writes that he is “at the mouth of the Hoogly river,” about 100 miles from Calcutta. In another, written two years later, he describes a “tedious” voyage of five months from Philadelphia to San Francisco. But after only a short time ashore, he thought San Francisco was “a dashing place” and “rather faster than Philadelphia.”

“Progress and Poverty” had a slow start, but within a few years, it was translated into a dozen languages, and more than two million copies were sold. Miss de Mille cherishes the memory of a postcard that George Bernard Shaw sent to her mother, in which he said that hearing Henry George talk turned an intellectual snob into a man. And she recalled, too, that the hero of Tolstoy's “Resurrection,” Nekhludoff, goes into exile in Siberia with a copy of “Progress and Poverty” under his arm.