

Mary Ellen Chase, 86, Dies; Prolific Author of 'Windswept'

NORTHAMPTON, Mass., July 29 (AP) — Mary Ellen Chase, author of two dozen books, including novels and biographies, and professor emeritus of English literature at Smith College, died yesterday at a nursing home here. She was 86 years old.

From Childhood Roots

A popular teacher and a prolific writer, Miss Chase began her career with finely focused stories based on her childhood reminiscences and moved into histories and essays dealing with American, English and Biblical literature.

But all during her life, she was identified with the rural Maine seacoast and the seafaring life she had known there as a child. Much of her writing, one critic said, could have been summed up by a remark from a character in her 1941 novel "Windswept".

"Roots matter terribly in one's life, one's faith, one's 'Windswept' was one of Miss Chase's earlier novels and one of her most enduringly popular. She named her summer home in Petit-Manan, Me., after it.

Mary Ellen Chase was born in Blue Hill, Me., a seacoast village founded in 1762 by her ancestors. In "A Goodly Heritage," she described her childhood, and in the best sellers, "Mary Peters," "Silas Crockett," and "Windswept," she called upon her experience to provide backgrounds for fiction.

She graduated from the University of Maine in 1909 and,

after several years of teaching in boarding schools, received a Ph.D. degree at the University of Minnesota. In 1926, she became professor of English at Smith College, where she taught until retiring in 1955.

Her class in the Bible, one of the most popular at Smith, became the basis for later writings about the Scriptures, including "The Bible and the Common Reader," which was widely praised for its understanding of both history and poetry.

Other writing about the Bible included "Readings from the Bible," "Life and Language of the Old Testament," "Psalms for the Common Reader" and "The Prophets for the Common Reader."

Miss Chase also wrote scholarly works on literary subjects, such as "Thomas Hardy from Serial to Novel," and biographies that included "Abby Aldrich Rockefeller," and "Jonathan Fisher: Maine Parson." The latter, a study of an early 19th-century ancestor of Miss Chase, was praised by Perry Miller, the critic, for its "revelation of a character" and "direct insight into the epoch."

In 1957, Miss Chase returned, in writing, to the Maine countryside in a novel, "The Edge of Darkness," which she later said was her favorite.

Miss Chase maintained residences here, in Maine and in Cambridge, England. She is survived by a brother, Newton Chase of Ojai, Calif., and two sisters, Mrs. Virginia Perkins of West Hartford, Conn., and Mrs. Edith Werren of Blue Hills.