

# Colby



Colby Quarterly

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Volume 6  
Issue 1 *March*

Article 4

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March 1962

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 6, no.1, March 1962, p.5-13

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MARY ELLEN CHASE: TEACHER, WRITER,  
LECTURER

By HELEN KIRKPATRICK MILBANK

IT is fashionable these days for institutions of higher learning to invite successful novelists and poets to spend a semester or longer on the campus, hopefully to teach a course in "creative writing," or perhaps just to be there as an object of interest to visitors and an example to students. Sometimes the Great Man or Great Woman turns out to be a good teacher, sometimes not.

"Creative-ness," some Geniuses have explained, "is stifled by the demands of the classroom." The demands of the classroom not only never stifled Mary Ellen Chase's creative abilities, they seemed on the contrary to enhance and excite them. Those institutions fortunate enough to have Miss Chase on their faculties were thus never troubled by this problem. The University of Minnesota and Smith College, the one for eight years and the other for thirty, had at one and the same time a born teacher and a writer whose works reach with deceptive ease from textbooks to best-selling novels. Tucked in are scholarly studies, biographies, short stories, book reviews and books for children. And nowhere along the line have colleagues or students been aware of any conflict in Mary Chase's mind between "creativity" and teaching. In any event, "creativity" is not the kind of a word Miss Chase would use to describe her talent.

Teaching comes first. Teaching has been Miss Chase's passion in life almost from the moment she gained the upper hand in a one-room school at Buck's Harbor, Maine, at the age of nineteen. It continues to make great inroads upon her retirement. Bible classes, lectures and other informal teaching sessions are all persistently pressed upon her by the old, the young, laymen and clergy. She accepts far more invitations to speak, to conduct seminars, and to write special articles (often for no fee) than those much younger, more robust, and less talented would dare to contemplate for themselves.

Miss Chase began teaching before she finished college because her father believed it to be an excellent intellectual disci-

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pline and an aid to maturity. She discovered in the rigors of Maine rural schools her love for study and for teaching. Mary Chase's progress from student at the University of Maine to professor at Smith College is fascinatingly described by her in *A Goodly Fellowship*.

Much of her philosophy of teaching emerges in these pages. Written in 1939, her views are timeless and prophetic; in fact, educators (as distinct from educationists) are coming around to them today. Having decided that she wanted to teach English and history, she "prepared to do so by electing all possible courses in both, together with the Classics, which I still believe to be, in the original or if the original is impossible, in translation, the best possible training for a teacher of English." Of the one course in 'Education' which she took mainly out of curiosity, she says "I cannot believe that I learned from it anything of value to me in teaching, largely because my professors of history, English and Classics were far better at their jobs than was my professor of 'Education,' who suffered by comparison."

There cannot be many distinguished professors of English with so catholic a teaching experience as Mary Ellen Chase. Beginning with the one-room schoolhouse in Maine where she taught everything that children ranging in ages from five to sixteen were taught in those days of no educational frills or gimmicks, she moved on to a teaching fellowship while an undergraduate at the University of Maine. Her next post, and her first upon graduation from college, was at a most unusual co-educational boarding school in Wisconsin. There her teaching of English and history was accompanied by strenuous duties as a housemother for children from five to twelve years of age.

After three wonderful years at the Hillside Home School, Miss Chase moved to Chicago in the illusory hope that she could combine teaching with work at the University towards a Master's degree. Mrs. Moffat's School for Girls required her to teach six subjects in addition to undertaking secretarial work for Mrs. Moffat. In spite of this fantastic load, she managed to work in two seminars at the University, one in philosophy and the other in history.

This work load must have had a good deal to do with the illness she was unable to shake off, and which resulted in her

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spending three years in Montana. No one who knows Mary Chase would dream of suggesting that these three years changed her from a good secondary school teacher into the brilliant professor of English and successful writer that she became. But they undoubtedly served to crystallize her ambitions and they provided her with time to do far more reading than either teaching or graduate work in themselves would have permitted. It was at this time, in the winter of 1914-15, that she first wrote for publication. Those unaware of her winters in Montana are apt to be startled by the titles of two of her books published in 1916 and 1917. *The Girl from the Big Horn Country* and *Virginia of Elk Creek Valley* seem a far cry from the essentially New England character of most of her other novels.

As soon as her health permitted, she began teaching in Bozeman, whose dry cold was prescribed by her doctor. When, two years later, she was given permission to leave Montana, she selected the University of Minnesota both for the excellence of its English faculty and for its medically-approved climate. Before she had completed the work on her Master's degree, the University had offered her a part-time instructorship. This became full-time when she had the M.A. She spent the next four years studying for her Ph.D. and teaching at the same time, a combination which suited both her tastes and her pocketbook. The arrangement was clearly satisfactory to the University since she was promoted to assistant professor on receipt of her Doctor's degree. For the next four years she taught not only at the University itself but night classes in the Extension program, as well as a course in advanced composition at the nearby Roman Catholic College of St. Catherine.

In her early days at Minnesota, she wrote weekly syndicated articles for Sunday School papers to earn some badly needed money. With the same motive, she took to the lecture platform and spoke on all manner of subjects to all manner of women's clubs and graduating classes whenever and wherever she was invited.

Mary Chase developed almost as much of a taste for lecturing as she had for teaching. There is, of course, a real kinship between the two, but beyond that extra dimension added to the classroom, there is the stimulus of new faces and places—both sources of unending delight to Miss Chase. And the lecture

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platform provided an excellent outlet for her highly developed sense of the dramatic. Noel Coward once told her that the theatre had been deprived of a great actress when she went into teaching.

I shall never forget the week when Mary Chase lectured to a group in the living room of our California house. On the urgent request of a number of friends whose sons had heard Miss Chase speak on the Bible at the Thacher School (where her brother is Headmaster), she agreed to talk to us about the Old Testament. For two hours each morning, some forty-five women sat enthralled. Miss Chase stood before us, the sunshine falling on her beautiful snowy hair, her expressive hands moving in slow emphatic gestures, and her voice suitably pitched to roll out the majestic poetry of the Psalms. Never before had the literature of the Bible come alive as it did for us during those days. She used no notes although she frequently cited chapters and verses, recited long passages or compared the language of the Revised Standard Version with that of the King James, to the infinite glory of the latter. She never talks down to her audiences, and she seemed to assume far greater knowledge on our part than she could possibly have believed us to possess. But she always helped us out. "Of course, as you all most certainly know, our word Bible comes from the Greek *biblion*."

It was easy to understand the reaction of a child at one of the local schools where Miss Chase spoke, presumably to the college preparatory group. At the end of her talk, she volunteered to answer questions. A small hand went up from among the lower school children.

"Yes, my child, what is it?"

"Please talk."

"But I have just *been* talking. What do you want me to talk about?"

"Anything. Just go on talking, please."

I have no doubt but that Mary Chase, the instructor and graduate student, held her audiences equally well in those days when thirty-five dollars were important additions to her University stipend.

Although she had been doing very well at Minnesota, the possibility of promotion to associate or to full professor seemed

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far off, if not out of the question. Universities at that time did not consider women eligible for the top academic posts. Miss Chase had, in any event, always looked forward to returning to New England. The opportunity to do so came in 1926 from a most welcome source. William Allan Neilson, president of Smith College, invited her to Northampton as an associate professor in the English department. She greatly admired President Neilson, and she knew that she would be able to advance in her field under a most distinguished scholar and in highly congenial surroundings.

Three years after she went to Smith College, Miss Chase published a textbook for use in the freshman English course: *Constructive Theme Writing for College Freshmen*, and two years later, in collaboration with Margaret Macgregor, a colleague in the English department, a book on *The Writing of Informal Essays*.

Mary Chase became chairman of the freshman English staff, and I quote from the remarks of a member of the staff at that time: "She took a proprietary interest in the vitality of the course and a personal interest in all those who taught it under her direction. The staff had an *esprit de corps* at that time which has never really been paralleled since. Fully respecting the individuality of its members, Mary managed to create a unanimity about ends and means within the staff. She loved what she did and she cared for her material, both literary and human. That is, she had a contagious enthusiasm for what she taught and she took a personal interest in the welfare of her students. She knew them, too."

If Miss Chase's own powerful personality was projected into the classroom—and in what great teacher's career has this not been the case?—she never *imposed* her opinions on others, students or colleagues, although she was never unwilling to express them. Her most trenchant criticism of today's teachers is reserved for those who never reveal their personal convictions. In her view, too few of them do, and she regards this as a great loss to the students as well as a diminution in the stature of the teachers.

Mary Chase had, and still has, a very clear notion of what she wished to accomplish in the teaching of English. She loves words. She has wanted her students to be able to read and

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understand words, without which, of course, no understanding of literature is possible. But basically she has wanted them to love words for their own sakes as she does. One of her students in freshman English recalls the times Miss Chase would tell them of her collection of words that were wonderful in themselves. "Blue—isn't that a wonderful word?" And she would then ask them to tell her words they thought wonderful.

English, as a study, she believes to be "more closely related to life than any other study, even than the sciences. . . . It is a language. . . . It is an art. . . . It seems the handmaiden to other subjects rather than the mistress of them all, simply because no other subject can be understood without it."

Miss Chase considers English the most difficult of all subjects to teach because it is by nature difficult to define and impossible to delimit. Those who advocate "methods" of teaching English risk her withering scorn. "Of all the excellent teachers of college English whom I have known I have never discovered one who knew precisely what he was doing. . . . Our objectives are as nebulous and intangible as are our methods, for the simple reason that we are dependent for the efficacy of both upon the multifarious imaginations of our students."

"Our one aim is to intensify the powers of thinking and of feeling in those whom we teach; and the only method we have of doing this is to open, through countless ways, every possible avenue to thought, emotion, and expression and to keep ourselves alive while we are doing so."

"What we are after is an awakened consciousness, differing in each individual, an excitement in thinking, reading, and writing for their own sake, new discoveries, new enthusiasms, the casting off, or the retention with better understanding, of the old."

The word *excitement* keeps reappearing in Miss Chase's account of graduate work at Minnesota, and in connection with professors and teachers with whom she has worked throughout her career. The good ones keep it, but all too many teachers lose it, and hence their ability to communicate with their students.

"Vision, that power of awakening the imagination, of exciting one's students to know more and more, of communicating

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the spell under which one has lived and studied—this it is that makes great teaching.”

Mary Ellen Chase's students will attest to her vision. I have never yet encountered one who does not recall vividly Miss Chase's classes, nor one to whom the use of the English language is a matter of indifference.

“Every hour in her course was so alive,” writes one who moved on from Miss Chase's freshman English course to her 19th Century Essays and finally into her course on the English novel. There were undoubtedly many who, like this student, had come to Smith College intent upon majoring in some other field but who elected English because of Miss Chase.

Archibald MacLeish sees the teaching of English literature as a process of “perception which has one foot in the text and the other in the world so that the two, text and world, are made to march together.”

The text and the world, the structure and the substance marched together in all Mary Chase's courses. The fascination of words was communicated to her students. Her values, her notions of good taste, of religion, of the universal truths were intertwined with punctuation and with sentence structure, with Thomas Hardy and with Henry Fielding. Sometimes forty minutes of the fifty minute period would slip by in what a pedantic educationist might regard as irrelevant discussion, and as the bell would be about to ring, Miss Chase would come hurriedly to the week's theme or reading. Week in, week out, her freshmen wrote a theme. She was a stern critic of their speech as well as of their writing. No Chase student is likely to be caught by her colleagues today, be they engaged in P.T.A. or in literary projects, with unfinished sentences or sloppy grammar.

If Miss Chase directed and taught freshman English with great verve and distinction, her real love was a course in the history of the English novel. Those teaching in this field are beholden to her for her slim volume (her doctor's dissertation), *Thomas Hardy: from Serial to Novel*, and for her introduction to the Everyman edition of *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

This love was superseded by a course which she introduced dealing with the Bible as literature. She had become more and more appalled by the students' total ignorance of the Bible, and while her New England subconscious may have been deter-



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mined to expose them to the Holy Writ, she ascribes to herself no such motive. She admits to a desire to give them some knowledge of the Bible, but her stated objective was to let them relish superb prose, and to discover the influence of the Authorized Version on English prose of the nineteenth century.

The enthusiasm with which this course was received, encouraged Miss Chase to share with the "common reader" her knowledge and love of the King James Version of the Bible as literature. The resulting work, published in 1944, was *The Bible and the Common Reader*, followed eight years later by selected and edited *Readings from the Bible*, and in 1955 by *Life and Language in the Old Testament*. Soon to be published (March 1962) is a book on *The Psalms for the Common Reader*.

As she became more and more engrossed in teaching and writing about the Old Testament, her lack of knowledge of Hebrew bothered her. Latin and Greek, she had learned at the Blue Hill Academy as a child. So, in the winter of 1947 in Cambridge, England, she embarked on a study of Hebrew. She has found her own conclusions on the literary quality of the Authorized Version, and on the character and traits of the Hebrew people, immensely strengthened by her acquaintance with the Hebrew language.

In 1948, Miss Chase was asked to help with the Revised Standard Version of the Bible "to make the English fall better." She was unable to convince the committee in charge of the new version that some of the prose and almost all of the poetry was translated in an awkward and bungling fashion. She remains exceedingly critical of much of this new version, especially of Isaiah and the Psalms.

If teaching came first in point of time in her career, her earliest dreams were of writing. Lack of funds urged her to try her hand and there is nothing to suggest that she has ever seen a rejection slip. Her pressing desire to communicate, to share with others her own zest for living, her love of the "sport" of teaching, her amusement at or her appreciation of people and places have led her to write an incredible number of books the while she has been fully engaged in teaching and administering a college department. Magazine articles, book reviews and

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the foreign editions of her books have been income-producing as well as enjoyable tasks.

Mary Ellen Chase considers herself more than well off for she has enough to live on comfortably, to dress with fastidiousness and taste, to provide funds for countless impecunious and deserving people and to contribute more than generously to good causes. She has, in fact, as a writer, reached that acme of the profession: she is highly regarded by the sharpest of critics, and the public buys her books in gratifying numbers.

Those who have had the good fortune to know Mary Ellen Chase would be hard pressed to decide which aspect of her life has made the greatest impact. All three of her careers—teaching, writing and lecturing—are inextricably bound together. The millions who have read, and who will in the future read, her books will far exceed the number of her students. And yet those students have, many of them, influenced other students. Her lecture audiences, like her readers and her students, will never again wholly escape the influence of this remarkable woman. They form, indeed, a goodly fellowship.

