

The First Departure Rev. E Monro

How grand, oh sea, thou lonely sea,
Is all thy wand'ring water:
But yet thou bearest far from me
My boy of song and laughter,
The boy who fill'd his mother's home
With life and joy and gladness,
Thou bearest on thy mighty waste,
And leav'st but tears and sadness.

Oh grand old sea, thy lonely waves,
How far the shores it laveth;
Yet to those shores thou bear'st away,
The boy my spirit craveth.
I miss him at our morning praise,
I miss him at our prayer,
I miss him at the Sunday Church,
My boy, you are not there.

Oh sea, oh sea, oh lonely sea,
Bring back upon thy water,
Before death's hand shall part from me,
My boy of song and laughter.
But greater far than thou, oh sea,
Is He who lives in heaven,
And He will keep my child for me,
Through grace unfailing given.

The Revd. Edward Monro (1815-1866) was a famous preacher and worker amongst the rural poor and railway navvies of Harrow Weald, where he was 'Perpetual Curate' from 1842 till 1860. One of his poems describes the fate of children who were forced out of the tiny parental cottage by the arrival of younger siblings, often to lodge unsupervised in a public house:

'To starve through infancy, through boyhood fight,
Drink through the years of youth, and then return
In manhood all the coin that they received,
Cool negligence repaying with stern hate,
And die at last without a thought of Heaven.'

Monro established a simple college for the sons of farm labourers, which opened in 1846 on the same day that the cornerstone was laid for his new church.

The late Professor Brian Heeney wrote:

'Physically it was modest enough, consisting of "a double cottage with a single one (one room) adjoining . . . thrown into one." In this little establishment, between twenty and thirty boys lived and learned in an atmosphere of rigorous piety. Up at five o'clock in the morning, these sons of cottagers and farm labourers engaged in a round of praying and learning, serving at tables, working in the school garden and farmyard, until the last of many bells summoned them to the last prayers of the day at 8: 30, one half-hour before bedtime.'

The poem Sullivan chose to set as the finale of his little song-cycle throws a personal light onto the college. Presumably one of Monro's protégés was about to emigrate to a new life.

As so often, Sullivan's choice of text shows him keenly alive to the claims of social justice.