CHAPTER 1

Introduction – belonging and local attachment

‘Where do you come from?’ must be one of the most frequent opening conversational lines in English. It can be interpreted in a number of ways, yet it always produces a reply and reciprocal interest, and its answer often appears to be confirmed by accent, personality, and appearance. It may establish rapport, but occasionally arouses distrust. Each place, and the many ways in which a person may be attached to it, has different cultural and subjective connotations. These indicate the crucial importance of ideas of belonging, or the wish for it, even in the modern world. Similarly, the search for ‘roots’, for one’s genealogy, fills record offices with people, inspires much local historical research, and manifests the same interest.

In many other areas of culture we also witness the desire for belonging and attachment to place. We hear this in popular song, from nostalgic nineteenth-century emigration songs, like ‘The leaving of Liverpool’, and earlier ballads like ‘Loch Lomond’, to ‘It’s a long way to Tipperary’, ‘Show me the way to go home’, ‘Maybe it’s because I’m a Londoner’, through to the more recent lyrics of ‘The green, green grass of home’, ‘I’m going home’, ‘Going to my home town’, ‘Clare to here’, and so on. Geordie oil workers, returning from the Scottish rigs, roar in deafening crescendo ‘I’m coming home Newcastle, wish I’d never been away’, as the train approaches their destination. Thousands more, in football stadiums, chant supportively for their home or adoptive town – even if they do not live or belong there, and even if their ‘local’ team includes not a single local player. These examples indicate a need to belong, to local community and people, and they often betoken local pride. Television adopts
this theme, with programmes such as Where the Heart Is, Born and Bred, Homeground, Last of the Summer Wine, Coronation Street, EastEnders, and so on. Even the places where these are set attract visitors hoping for a sense of contiguous locality and incorporation. Such cultural and media expressions, only a few of many that could be cited, show the enduring appeal of local belonging, even if much of this is hopeful or forlorn, revealing as much about a sense of displacement as of belonging. After all, most songs celebrating belonging are about distance, dispersion and dispossession.

There seems little doubt that in both advanced and less developed economies many people have experienced a loss of belonging and local attachment. Insecurity has become a widespread experience, and the problem of non-belonging has become more acute. Multiple or ambiguous belonging are now common, and have permeated identities and personalities. The issues of locality and belonging are ones that have growing urgency for us today, given the pace of globalisation, and its many personal, cultural and economic effects. ‘Modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ are said to have a corrosive effect on belonging and on ‘traditional communities’, with expansive travel, separation of home and workplace, frequent disruption of work patterns, and removal of people from the neighbourhoods where they were raised. Some theorists even argue that capitalism has long been fundamentally inimical to belonging, that the two are essentially incompatible. Such a view seems increasingly applicable to the experiences of recent decades, although this book offers an alternative picture of earlier periods.

Belonging raises many subjective issues. Take my personal case. I was born and then lived in many African countries until my late teens. As a child I spoke three African languages fluently. My father was an English engineer from Lincoln who became a tropical forestry expert, and my mother left Wales to teach in Hong Kong. I was educated partly in England, but often stayed on Welsh relatives’ farms. For me, the contrasts have been acute between African societies, divergent Welsh and English cultures, and local senses of place in Britain. My own upbringing and its frequent dislocations, some in response to post-colonial wars, my views of poverty and ways of living in Africa, and of Welsh farming, quietly influence this book, more
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so than any theory or historiographical concerns. In other words, this is a book by an outsider lacking a strong sense of belonging, who was attracted to British local history as some highly localised people are attracted to internationalism. That background is mentioned because such an upbringing maps on to the various experiences of countless others faced with disruption of locality and community, with extreme travel, globalisation, and the need to adapt daily or periodically to great cultural contrasts. These themes are subjectively experienced, but they have a wider significance as being intrinsic to ‘modernisation’ and ‘globalisation’, to the problems, opportunities and types of person that the modern world produces. They dispose to certain kinds of historical agendas: in my case, to a curiosity about locality, belonging and migration in the past, to an assessment of how ‘belonging’ used to manifest itself, and to the question of what we are now losing.

The historical questions certainly press upon us. This book is prefaced with a quotation from T. S. Eliot, asking what life there can be other than one lived in community, and lamenting community and mutual care now dispersed on ribbon roads – ‘familiar with the roads and settled nowhere’. Eliot converted to the Church of England in 1927, and was fascinated by its rituals. He was deeply pessimistic about the prospects of ‘attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality’ – views that many would not share. Was he right to stress religion in people’s senses of belonging? How did people feel a sense of belonging to places in the past? What territorial units did they belong to? Was the parish or northern township the crucial entity here, given its saliency in local administration? How was ‘belonging’ structured by law, forms of welfare, local economies, topography, social attitudes, and local customs? In what ways were people’s attitudes shown? How were insider–outsider differences focused? What were the forms of local prejudice or confined humanitarianism, and how deeply rooted were they? Why did such attitudes change? What regional differences were there? How did urbanisation affect people’s senses of belonging, and did towns try to replicate rural community expectations?

In modern nations countless people are not enfranchised ‘citizens’ where they live, and in that sense they do not ‘belong’ – what were the historical equivalents of this at parish level in the past? What succeeded as ties of belonging, and what failed?

In these questions, can one discover when and how changes occurred, so that they can be interpreted more readily? These were some of the background issues that I set out to clarify, along with questions of multiple belonging, and these chapters are a partial answer to them. Like all useful history, they aim to provide context for us today. They should help fathom some of our own concerns, and I would not pursue them if I thought otherwise. The sensitivity, skill and utility of any historian comes in taking such modern questions, feeling their immediacy and justifying them to readers, and then in finding ways, sources and methods which convincingly answer them from the historical experience, while endeavouring to be true and exact to the history that one uncovers.

Some of this book concerns centralisation, raising issues to do with its extent, timing, its impact upon local communities, and on how people felt that they belonged to their localities. The prolonged importance of the parish, much stressed in this book, was partly due to the ways in which local communities asserted themselves. A strong case can be made for ‘invigorated localism’ in the mid-nineteenth century, lasting through to the 1870s or beyond, and much of my evidence supports such a view.\(^2\) It is easy now to overlook or forget how vehement and heated the opposition to centralisation was at that time. Central policy was pragmatically adjusted and often downplayed in response to strident local reception, notably on matters like poor law policy, or the civil and ecclesiastical reform of the parish. Some attacks on central administration need to be taken with a pinch of salt, and local administration in some cases meant not local obligation but local neglect. Nevertheless, ‘the Pope of Somerset House’ was attacked in the name of ‘local responsibility’, ‘the spirit of Local Self-Government’, the right of ‘any place striking out any path of improvement for itself’, and the need for rights,

liberties, ‘local knowledge’, and ‘free institutions’. There was widespread condemnation of the ‘vices of Centralisation’, seeing it as ‘subservient sycophancy and moral degradation’ and ‘dictated monotonous and meaningless routine’, which would crush ‘the sense of local responsibility’ and break up ‘local knowledge’. These examples are from Joshua Toulmin Smith, a barrister who also condemned the way in which the new poor law ‘was devised in order to destroy . . . the sense of local duty and responsibility’, and its ‘lessening of the knowledge of and taking part by every district in its own affairs’, producing apathy and ‘indifference to public and local duties and responsibilities’.

Countless examples from other sources could be added to similar effect. Such quotations give a flavour of how resolute opposition to centralisation once was, highlighting the enduring strength of nineteenth-century localism. This resistance led central authorities (like the Poor Law Commission or Board) to claim defensively that they ‘abstained carefully from doing anything which might extinguish the spirit of local independence and self-government’. In the face of bitter local counter-attacks, on many different issues, other central authorities had to tread warily too, and they often made little headway. Indeed, centralising moves often prompted renewed local and civic vigour, as local authorities exerted themselves in opposition to central initiatives regarding the poor law, public health, transport, police, and so on. It was arguably much later, from the 1870s, with more substantial grants-in-aid from central government connected with education, roads, and the like, and most notably with the much larger welfare and other payments by the Treasury in the twentieth century, that centralisation and its bureaucracies became more pronounced and dominant. These issues

3 J. Toulmin Smith, Local Self-Government and Centralization: The Characteristics of Each (London, 1851), pp. 158, 205, 360–6, 395–400. He wrote much in similar spirit, and see also his The Parish: Its Powers and Obligations at Law, as Regards the Welfare of Every Neighbourhood, and in Relation to the State: its Officers and Committees: and the Responsibility of Every Parishioner (1854, London, 1857). Such language pervaded the Anti-Centralization Society, the anti-new poor law and anti-Public Health Act (1848) campaigns, and many other anti-centralisation movements. This thinking had a limited influence upon the Local Government Act of 1894 and its establishment of parish councils.

are fascinating, not least in the context of later twentieth-century centralisation and planning, imposed standardisation, and related debates about the dwindling role of local government. The nineteenth-century arguments also presage debates at another level about the European Union. Finance has continued to be a key issue: among European countries today Britain has one of the highest concentrations of taxing power in central government hands.

However, this is not formally intended as another book on central–local relations, on centralisation as a governmental process, on ‘revolutions in government’ and their top-down effects. It views centralisation differently, being concerned with its effects on belonging and local identity, and with judging the momentum of centralisation by those effects: with parochial survival and the pace of de-localisation, and the sentiments, structures and cultures of local attachment in neighbourhoods and parishes. It discusses matters such as whether people married locally, whether they accepted settlement by outsiders, divisions between insiders and outsiders, poor relief and the parish, local office-holding, ‘new parish’ formation, and subjective senses of belonging. It is concerned with the repercussions for the parish and its inhabitants of centralising and globalising trends. Those trends are double-sided coins – central:local – global:local – and I am interested in the less considered local and received dimension, the subjective responses to centralisation and globalisation, and those reactions as seen from below. In other words, I am assessing when and to what extent de-localising trends had their main influence at local level, and uncovering at the micro-level people’s attachments to place, and their experience and responses to de-localisation.

Globalisation is now often taken as the broader phenomenon affecting local history. Since the eighteenth century there have been major shifts in the world market economy, the expansion of empire, European emigration, advances in the technology of transport and communications, and the spread of international symbols. These processes did not go unchecked: there were economic downturns and cycles, war-time constraints, retreats from empire. However, the changes have accelerated in the late twentieth century, and strikingly so from the 1970s, with advances in communications, a tendency to cultural uniformity,
and radical developments in financial markets. While centralisation made localities or regions more similar, and caused local affiliations to be eclipsed by notions of society and nation, globalisation accentuated de-territorialisation and de-localism across nations. Both centralisation and globalisation connect the local with the general: they are different processes, although one seems dependent upon the other, and their local effects on belonging and identities are comparable. The literature on globalisation, and its effects on localities, identities, and local history, is growing apace.5 I am not studying globalisation directly here, in the conventional, expansionist way. Rather, I am concerned with its ‘other side’, with the experienced decline of local administration, associated cultures and a sense of belonging to localities and parishes. Globalisation and centralisation in all countries trigger defensive and sometimes violent reactions, among peoples who see their culture and local ways of life threatened or destroyed. These problems, with all their humanitarian, environmental, cultural, economic and political dimensions, are among the most important of our time. Among the issues linked to them, as an English and Welsh historian I think especially of questions concerning the integrity and survival of the parish or other local entities as civil and religious units, of efforts in the nineteenth century to break down popular notions of identity and belonging, of the extent of people’s local horizons, of questions that relate belonging and community to the decline of the organic economy and to its gradual supplanting by new economic forms, of the changing scales and credibility of local and community history, and of questions that concern the limits and boundaries that people set in the exercise of their humanity to others.

Given centralising and globalising trends, the significance of the larger contexts in which places are situated has become ever more apparent. Local place has become less a source of identity than hitherto, losing much of its social meaning. Modern communications alter or hide personalities, and undercut the viability and intuitive understandings of face-to-face communities. Many sociologists tell us that community and civic engagement are in serious decline. They document huge turnover, a culture of transience, among people who, residing only a few years in a place and often working long and stressful hours elsewhere, see little reason to become involved with a local community that is breaking up like a dissolving aspirin. Local democracy, and the role of traditional local power structures, seem to become increasingly irrelevant. Decision-making occurs elsewhere, by distant planners, unrepresentative unelected quangos, or in board-rooms, with an eye to shareholders who are not locally tied. Power and capital have become increasingly divorced from obligations and responsibilities to local communities. Indeed, ‘human corporate owners are being replaced by non-human computer programmes that move investment funds around according to abstruse formulas, enriching the few while destroying lives and communities’. Power has gone into hiding. Multi-national companies readily evade the consequences of their actions, moving away from sites of waste and unemployment, even while they pretend otherwise by calling themselves ‘multi-local multi-nationals’, still trying to incorporate ideas of ‘local’ into their transnational corporate image. Community and public trust is fading, especially as power becomes more distant. Ancillary to these developments, travel and mobility now transform senses of history, rendering it shallow and of limited meaning, shifting its political purposes, blurring the possibilities and point of ‘community’ recall and local discernment, thus even justifying professional historians like myself, who sometimes fill in for the lack of community recollection. All these changes in our society call for a re-thinking of our historical purposes, of what we write history for, and indeed why we read it.

7 *Financial Times* (29 April 2004).
The opinions about locality of George Eliot, and about local perception by Adrian Bell – quotations from them preface this book – are increasingly jostled aside through the technology of modern travel and the separations of work, home and leisure. Adrian Bell could once write that ‘To swan around the globe means nothing . . . to burrow into one place is what gives it meaning to you, and ultimately you to yourself.’ Yet he formed such opinions back in the 1920s, as part of a generation reacting against the First World War, facing the inter-war rural depression in East Anglia. A persistent theme in his farming work and ‘land literature’ was an effort to link past, present and future in village life, to find ‘some basis of unity, the germ of a new coherence’. The colossal and pointless shadow of the First World War lurked just behind him, as he closed in on the texture and grain of rural life. Yet as the lantern gave way to electricity, pantiles to sheet iron, he saw the ‘new’ farming methods – modern machinery, motorised transport, factory farming, new marketing and business methods, hedge removals, and so on – and believed that he was describing the passing of a whole culture, with its own distinctive senses of place and belonging, of rural artifacts, horse power, hand technologies and people skilled in them. Even so, for him at least, local places were still unique, singular, and lent themselves to distinctive personal identities.

Into the twenty-first century, localities seem less distinct and singular – they are becoming as homogeneous as the McDonalds containers that litter them, as the mass culture that standardises them. So many of our townscape could be anywhere or nowhere, like a Lee Friedlander photograph depicting American urban space as nondescript, empty and two-dimensional, a mere cross-sectional view of means of transport, lacking a settled focus. Such areas are less a place than a vapid condition – one cannot belong there, and would not wish to do so. The modern developments have often obliterated the humane vicinity that once gave a form to home and life, as so many people find when they revisit the sites of their childhood. The contrasts

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between past and present in respect of ‘belonging’ are so great for many people that it can sometimes feel as though one is looking back through the light and dark shades of the present, to discover their antithesis in the past – piecing together, so to speak, the historic photographic negative that has depicted us, inverted such that the lights of its local neighbourhoods have become dark, and the darks of its distant horizons have become light. For ‘organic’ communities and forms of local territorial thought and practice now disintegrate worldwide before waves of cultural contact, rapid transport, economic extension and financial speculation. Most historians, including myself, think of community as formed mainly within a bounded area in which virtually everybody knew each other, to which people felt that they belonged, and which commonly had administrative functions. Yet we now have location-free ‘imagined’, ‘communication’, ‘simulated’, or ‘virtual’ communities – and there are some theorists who believe that these are communitarian improvements on, and better substitutes for, the past. So many people now live outside territory and community as defined by local space, at least for part of their time. Indeed, to be local is thought by many to be a sign of social deficiency and degradation, of marginalisation and constraint. Measures of ‘the quality of life’ even stigmatise localism and a failure to be mobile as ‘deprivation’, and seriously formalise that judgement in quantitative indicators. The ‘working community’ and its reciprocal networks, as historians sense it through the photography of Frank Meadow Sutcliffe in Whitby, P. H. Emerson on the Norfolk Broads, or the writings of William Cobbett, John Clare, Richard Jefferies, George Sturt, Flora Thompson, Daniel Parry-Jones, Leo Walmsley, Lewis Jones, Adrian Bell, A. G. Street, H. J. Massingham, Alwyn Rees, Raymond Williams, and countless other writers, has often ceased to exist. Indeed, most of those authors were themselves documenting its decline. We are faced with the questions of what we should replace localism with, and of how viable for human needs the replacements will be. Questions of liberal toleration of diversity in a world system, of whether small-scale territorialism and cultural variation can co-exist with globalisation, are unresolved as yet, and are among the most interesting uncertainties of the coming decades. Globalisation might still entail ‘a rainbow of localisms’ –