What role did the parish play in people’s lives in England and Wales, between 1700 and the mid-twentieth century? By comparison with globalisation and its dislocating effects, this book stresses how important parochial belonging once was. Professor Snell discusses themes such as subjective ideas of belonging, cultures of local xenophobia, settlement law and practice, marriage patterns, the continuance of outdoor relief in people’s own parishes under the new poor law, the many new parishes of the period and their effects upon people’s local attachments. The book highlights the continuing vitality of the parish as a unit in people’s lives, and the administration associated with it. It employs a variety of historical methods, and makes important contributions to the history of welfare, community identity and belonging. It is highly relevant to the modern themes of globalisation, de-localisation, and the decline of community, helping to set such changes and their consequences into local historical perspective.

PARISH AND BELONGING

Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950

K. D. M. SNEll
This book is dedicated to Charles Phythian-Adams,
Professor of English Local History,
learned colleague and friend
A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth, for the labours men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it, for whatever will give that early home a familiar unmistakable difference amidst the future widening of knowledge: a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection, and kindly acquaintance with all neighbours, even to the dogs and donkeys, may spread not by sentimental effort and reflection, but as a sweet habit of the blood. At five years old, mortals are not prepared to be citizens of the world, to be stimulated by abstract nouns, to soar above preference into impartiality; and that prejudice in favour of milk with which we blindly begin, is a type of the way body and soul must get nourished at least for a time. The best introduction to astronomy is to think of the nightly heavens as a little lot of stars belonging to one’s own homestead.

(George Eliot, Daniel Deronda (1876, Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 50)

What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of GOD.
Even the anchorite who meditates alone,
For whom the days and nights repeat the praise of GOD,
Prays for the Church, the Body of Christ incarnate,
And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads,
And no man knows or cares who is his neighbour
Unless his neighbour makes too much disturbance,
But all dash to and fro in motor cars,
Familiar with the roads and settled nowhere.
Nor does the family even move about together,
But every son would have his motor cycle,
And daughters ride away on casual pillions.


Driving a pony and trap one’s eyes are released from the road-hypnotism of motor travel; one gazes upon the fields and up into the trees. Gardens present themselves like Nature’s shop-windows, and domestic moments through open cottage doors. The birds are not frightened from the hedges; paddocked horses look over and greet the
stranger... It is not merely the handling of reins instead of wheel; one slips into another rhythm of life altogether, as different from the mechanical as the regular jog of the trap is from the jumpy repercussions of the car on the roadway. One’s radius both contracts and expands. That is to say, while the circumference of miles at one’s disposal is halved, their content is more than doubled. For quiet pace is like a magnifying-glass; regions one has before passed over as familiar suddenly enlarge with innumerable new details and become a feast of contemplation... We found we had been living in an undiscovered country... One can only take one bite of life, whether one nibble at every land or explore thoroughly a single parish.

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