INTRODUCTION

Life in a Nature Reserve

Contexts do not neatly condense into symbols; they must be told through stories that give them mass and dimension.

—Rosalind Petchesky

Reproduction and the Making of Good Lives

What are the environments in which ethics are conceived, lived, and reproduced? This book addresses this question directly by analysing one group of people’s ideas about reproduction alongside their everyday ethics. In this ethnography, I explore their ideas about reproduction and assisted reproductive technologies (ART) in a time characterised by the rise of biotechnology, fear of environmental crisis, explicit attention to ethics, and intense public scrutiny of reproduction, parenting, and kinship. My aim is to show that we need to grasp the ways in which reproduction touches on all aspects of life, as well as the ways in which people balance everyday responsibilities and relational commitments with moral values when making ethical judgements.

In public debates about reproduction and particularly ART, the question has tended to be whether a particular decision or technique is ethical or unethical, as if ethics could be reduced to binary moral judgements. This book takes a step back and asks instead, what makes reproduction a matter of ethical attention and concern? Starting with this question allows for a far deeper understanding of what using technology to assist reproduction means, of how it is experienced, and of what effects it has and might have in the future.
This book is based on the ethnographic research I carried out in Spey Bay, a coastal village in northeast Scotland, beginning in late 2005, plus various follow-up trips. My main period of participant observation was twenty months long and included semiformal interviews with nearly thirty of the people I regularly interacted with, which were recorded and transcribed. This ethnography describes the reproductive ethics of a group of middle-class people making “good” lives in Spey Bay who have no personal involvement in ART themselves. As the prologue indicates, these are people who are specifically concerned about the future of the natural world and who see themselves as part of an interconnected and biodiverse environment that is under threat from human activity. As I will show, reproduction and reproductive technologies are enmeshed in larger ethical considerations; for this group of people, these are considerations about how to make a good life and how best to do so in a way that does not harm the environment. By focusing on what people say about reproduction as well as their everyday practices and experiences, I examine how ethics is made through claims and actions, as well as asking what types of knowledge and knowledge practices are at stake in reproductive ethics.

ART have provoked intense public and media debate in the UK as elsewhere, but just whose voices are being heard in these debates? If ART are important, and I think most people would agree that they are, should we only know what they mean to some people? Not only is this a question of getting a fuller picture or more data, it is also questioning a privileged or interested view. It is about taking what “ordinary” people think about these technologies seriously and questioning the way in which public opinion on ART and reproductive ethics has been depicted in the media and in parliament.

As Ann V. Bell’s work on inequalities in access to ART amongst people with different socioeconomic statuses in the United States shows, ART are not equally available to all people, and this is true even in the UK despite the fact that the National Health Service (NHS) provides limited infertility treatment to
people who meet fairly stringent age and health criteria. Here, ART are largely available to people with a certain amount of money. This is because, in a country that is famously proud of its universal public health care system, most people opt into the private health care system for ART. But it is also because the time spent administering treatments, being tested, and attending doctors' appointments would be difficult for most people to square with the demands of full-time employment and because increasing numbers of people perceive that their best option is to go abroad for fertility treatment. Many people who would like to have children but who have not been able to conceive cannot access technological “fixes”—for medical, economic, and legal reasons—and many believe that even if they did so it would not necessarily remedy their infertility—and, strictly speaking, ART do not treat infertility so much as bypass it.

As Sarah Franklin has shown, in the UK IVF is a “platform technology,” providing the basis for research and development into stem cell therapies, regenerative medicine, and genetic testing. The British government also sees it as fertile ground for developing the lucrative biotechnology industry. As she puts it, “A long legacy of public support for increasingly radical forms of human embryo research, combined with explicit cross-party support for ongoing innovation in this field, has embedded a logic that is now seemingly part of the British national imaginary, and is celebrated as a source of national pride.”

If we consider this bigger picture, it seems that, in fact, there are very few people who are not affected by ART in the UK. It also hints at some of the specific interests that are influencing public debates about ART.

An important observation that has arisen from a number of clinic-based ethnographies is that ART can place greater pressure on infertile people to try, or to be seen to be trying, every possible remedy for their childlessness. As well as putting specific pressures on particular individuals and couples, these technologies have probably contributed to a trend towards greater medicalisation of reproduction and infertility, as well as a sense...
that the decision not to have children, whether or not one is infertile, is an aberrant or pathetic one. It may also be that the availability of ART has contributed to a parenting culture that puts pressure on parents to maximise every opportunity to improve the health and future of their children or risk being stigmatised and even prosecuted as a “bad” parent. In other words, we are all implicated in ART.

ART do, of course, bring joy and relief to many people, and my intention is certainly not to belittle the anguish that infertility causes many people, to recommend that they should not have access to medical assistance to help them conceive, or to imply that individuals who are infertile—or, for that matter, gay or single parents—should shoulder the responsibility for wider social, legal, economic, or political inequalities. Instead, I simply want to keep sight of the fact that, as many of the early feminist critics of ART pointed out, reproductive technologies are not politically or ethically neutral. As many of these scholars predicted, despite their apparently revolutionary and radical potential, they can be critical in the protection, reproduction, and promotion of established norms and ideologies of kinship, sexuality, and gender. As the continuing and lucrative normalisation and development of these technologies show, it is not only social norms that are being protected by ART but also the industry that creates, develops, and “translates” them into financial returns. It seems a little strange, given this, that we know so little about what “ordinary” people—that is, not patients, clinicians, medical researchers, politicians, bioethicists, or theologians, but everyone else—think about these technologies, when they are the context that provides the ground for and also receives the effects, positive and negative, radical and conservative, that these technologies bring about.

Technologies are made by people in particular contexts, they are developed by people in particular contexts, and they are used by people in particular contexts. In his classic study of another defining technology of the twentieth century, television, Raymond Williams pointed out the dangers of attributing agency to
technologies, such as in the idea that violent films cause higher homicide rates. He counsels us to question the assumption that television or any other technology can cause any particular social effect and warns against the idea that technologies originate in isolation. Williams charts how television developed in a context in which it made sense and seemed to meet certain needs, from the desire of people to communicate across distances in a period of greater geographical mobility, to the centralisation of political power, to the development of the mass media. However, in assessing the causes and effects of technologies, he says, we must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater:

While we have to reject technological determinism, in all its forms, we must be careful not to substitute for it the notion of a determined technology. . . . Determination is a real social process, but never (as in some theological and some Marxist versions) a wholly controlling, wholly predicting set of causes. On the contrary, the reality of determination is the setting of limits and the exertion of pressures, within which variable social practices are profoundly affected but never necessarily controlled. We have to think of determination not as a single force, or a single abstraction of forces, but as a process in which real determining factors—the distribution of power or of capital, social and physical inheritance, relations of scale and size between groups—set limits and exert pressures, but neither wholly control nor wholly predict the outcome of complex activity within or at these limits, and under or against these pressures.

One of the major arguments of this book is that we need, as researchers, citizens, or activists, to attend to the importance of what reproduction and ART mean to whole communities and not only to individuals who are consumers, or purveyors, of these technologies. The fact that ART have been so hotly and publicly contested in the UK and elsewhere indicates that reproduction and ART affect all our lives—not only in our own individual
reproductive decision making but because questions about how, when, if, and with whom (if anyone) we have children seem to reflect something about who we are as a community or society. We should be asking what our ideas about reproduction and ART tell us about ourselves. The good news is that social scientific research methods provide us with the tools to do that, as this book will show.

Reproduction, Bioethics, and Context

The ethical questions that reproduction and reproductive technologies seem to inevitably raise have been exercising politicians, theologians, feminists, and others for many decades now. Alongside this, there has been a continuous interest in the same sorts of questions amongst social scientists. As their work reminds us, reproduction provokes different kinds of ethical questions and relates to different conceptions of ethics. Thus debates about the ethics of abortion, for example, may be, amongst other things, about limiting or extending legal rights to certain forms of life, the morality of denying medical services to the poor, medical ethics, the ontological status of embryos and foetuses, exposing coercive sexual encounters, upholding religious doctrine, recognising gender inequalities in child care and work, protecting particular populations through pro-natalist policies or preventing reproduction amongst certain groups according to eugenicist ideologies, assumptions about the nature of bodily autonomy, or the desirability of medical interventions in human reproduction. Whilst each of these considerations might be broken down into different domains—law, politics, civil rights, professional conduct, and so on—they are also each in their own way ethical questions, as they demand that people reflect on what is the good thing to do, or the best reason to take one course of action and not another. When making public claims intended to effect political, social, or legal change, advocates of certain positions will often select particular strands and pull on
them to weave together their arguments. Seeking to pull apart these different types of ethical questions rather than working within their interconnectedness may, then, be an interested move with particular aims.

The major academic discipline to focus its attention on ART, in addition to scholars in sociology, anthropology, and science and technology studies, has been bioethics. Since its inception, bioethics has been closely associated with questions about reproduction, initially focusing on abortion but increasingly on ART and associated techniques. Alongside questions about the beginning and end of life and the informed consent of patients and participants in medical research, a major consideration that has exercised bioethics is the issue of payment or compensation for bodily “products” and “services.” Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby have recently argued that “bioethics as discourse and practice is internal to the political economy of the life sciences,” even when it takes a principled position against bodily commodification. So, in a post-Fordist world of precarious, transnational, and informal labour, the bioethical principle of compensation rather than payment can propel large numbers of people into acting as vendors of tissues and as research subjects in order to supplement low incomes and to access health care for themselves. The valorisation of informed consent, they argue, contributes to this as egg vendors, surrogate mothers, and embryo donors are effectively signing away their right to seek redress for any harm caused by participating in the fertility industry or clinical research, thus exposing themselves not only to the bodily risks of such procedures but also the risks of precarious and informal “work.”

In the UK, bioethicists are more familiar figures in public debates about reproductive technologies than are social scientists, and they also provide advice to government and regulators. Bioethics is both a response to medical technologies that create, extend, and end life and a by-product of them. The development of this discipline not only reflects a burgeoning of technologies that seem to challenge ethical assumptions and modes
of medical practice but also implies a consensus that bioethical questions are important and complex enough to warrant the development of specialist expertise beyond the clinic or lab. As I will argue here,\(^{10}\) it is important to remember the contexts into which both bioethics and ART were born, as well as to question just what makes any particular treatment or technology a subject of bioethical concern.

Historically, the dialogue between bioethicists and social scientists has centred on questions of universalism versus particularism, which generally speaking reflects a broad disciplinary difference in that bioethicists seek to identify and even prescribe ethical practice whilst social scientists aim to describe and understand it. One important example of this is a special issue of the academic journal *Daedalus* titled “Bioethics and Beyond” edited by Arthur Kleinman, Renée C. Fox, and Arthur M. Brandt and published in 1999. In this issue, Kleinman articulates the importance of social scientific insights to bioethics:

> Bioethics is confronted with an extraordinarily difficult quandary: how to reconcile the clearly immense differences in the social and personal realities of moral life with the need to apply a universal standard to those fragments of experience that can foster not only comparison and evaluation but also action. For philosophers, the gulf between the universal and the particular may be regarded as an irksome and perennial barrier; but bioethicists, like clinicians and policy implementers, simply cannot function without finding a way of relating ethical deliberation to local contexts.\(^{11}\)

One particularly important point that Kleinman makes is that the critique of universalism in bioethics that many social scientists have made is not an attempt to undermine a competing discipline but to suggest that if bioethicists were to attend to some of the findings of social scientific research, this could inform, and therefore strengthen, bioethical analysis, policy, and practice\(^{12}\)—and, by implication, make it more ethical. As
Kleinman suggests and leading American bioethicist Daniel Callahan\textsuperscript{13} confirms, there is an intractable tension between social scientists’ and bioethicists’ approaches to ethics because the latter are—at least to varying degrees and with different sympathies—committed to finding widely, if not universally, applicable principles. But that does not mean that the other side of the coin is social scientists dogmatically promoting cultural relativism. It is instead about problematising a discipline that can, in its insistence on generalisable principles, succumb to paternalism and even moral imperialism.\textsuperscript{14}

Another important point that comes out of this debate is the individualism inherent in bioethics and the difficulty it has had with conceiving of ethics in a way that accounts for more communitarian values and experiences, which in my view reflects a stereotypical picture of people in Western countries as being primarily self-interested. This debate also points to a division between ethics as a constant process of self-fashioning and lived practice on the one hand and ethics as a set of codified principles governing a particular profession or practice on the other. Bioethics, by its very nature, is required to prioritise principles over practices, which can mean failing to fully recognise the fact that professional ethics and the wider ethical values and practices of the societies in which doctors and researchers operate are inseparable.

Like Kleinman, Barry Hoffmaster\textsuperscript{15} has argued for bioethics’ greater engagement with social scientific research, based on his sense that bioethics should be as much about understanding ethical decisions as justifying them. Hoffmaster believes that a bioethics that is “situated in lived human experience,”\textsuperscript{16} informed by social scientists’ findings, is a better bioethics. He also draws attention to the importance of emotions in ethical decisions:

Putting bioethics in personal, social, and cultural contexts opens the way for modes of moral deliberation that are not general, rational, and impartial but that embrace the distinctive histories, relationships, and milieus of people and engage
their emotions as much as their reason. Such a bioethics also recognizes the multiple backgrounds—institutional, economic, historical, and political—that structure moral problems and give meanings to moral concepts. This is a bioethics situated in lived human experience. The qualitative research approaches of the social sciences, ethnography in particular, can be used to explore the moral dimensions of that experience and thus to enhance our understanding of the nature of morality and its place in our lives. The ultimate goal of this endeavor is a bioethics that is more attuned to the particular and more sensitive to the personal—a bioethics that is more humane and more helpful.\textsuperscript{17}

Of course, in order to convince bioethicists that they need to incorporate social scientific research into their work they will have to be persuaded of the importance of context in ethical decision making, and it seems that there is still work to do in this respect. Bioethicists, along with policymakers and regulators, need to understand that context is not a euphemism for mitigating circumstances but instead a way of attuning oneself to the contingent realities of people’s lives. Nonetheless, bioethics has taken “an empirical turn,”\textsuperscript{18} with direction from some of the leading figures in bioethics, including Daniel Callahan, co-founder of the Hastings Center, for greater attention to alternative moral positions within bioethics. I would sound a note of caution here. Both bioethicists and social scientists should remember that questions of universals and particulars are not the same as questions of Western and non-Western values. That is, whilst bioethicists should certainly attend to other moral worlds and try to develop models that take account of the multiple interests that may be at stake in any particular ethical decision, they should not assume that we know Western moralities by reading them off from laws or professional codes of conduct or that moral philosophy is a mirror onto “Western ethics.”

Bioethics is itself shaped by its context, just as the social sciences are, but we cannot assume that that context is simply
something that can be labelled “Western culture.” As Duncan Wilson says about the development of bioethics in the UK, “the ‘bioethical’ aspects of particular practices and objects were not self-evident, but were the product of specific socio-political contexts and professional agendas in the late twentieth century.” He therefore urges us to consider what made certain treatments and technologies worthy of the attention of bioethicists (and, by extension, what made others unworthy of such attention).19 In Britain, Wilson writes, bioethics did not have much sway until the 1980s. Similarly, and probably not coincidentally, the birth of the first IVF baby, Louise Brown, in 1978 and the initial expansion of IVF were largely viewed positively, but by the 1980s, there were increasing calls for greater external oversight of doctors and researchers in the media, and lawyers and philosophers started to enter the public debate, which dovetailed with the new Conservative government’s desire to see greater “accountability” amongst professions and the promotion of (consumer) choice in all aspects of life.20 A further important point that Wilson makes is that, though some bioethicists have asserted that the discipline has its roots in the civil rights movement and a left-wing concern with medical paternalism, bioethics in the UK only took off because the call for greater oversight resonated with the Thatcherite political climate of the 1980s and because bioethicists portrayed themselves to the medical profession as helpers at least as much as critics.21

In the British and Scottish parliaments, debates about reproduction, including abortion, ART, and, most recently, treatments for mitochondrial disease, are treated as “matters of conscience,” so politicians deciding how to regulate them do so off their own bat rather than according to the party line, which already hints at some of the complexities of reproductive ethics, even in the soundbite-friendly world of political wrangling. The fact that differing moral positions are conventionally respected in this way also implies a tacit assumption that there are no universal right answers with which to settle such ethical questions.
What I want to suggest here is that there is something else missing from our picture of public debates about ART, and that is the ethics of people who are not using these technologies themselves but who are concerned about them and about what they mean, who have rarely been the subject of research. This is partly a problem of representation and a reflection of the fact that both politics and the media favour succinct and generalisable data over the complex and nuanced accounts that qualitative sociologists and anthropologists (and, I’m sure, some bio-ethicists) deal in, but I think it also suggests a sense that medical technologies only affect those who are treated with them, which is untenable. One clear empirical point that this book illustrates is that it is very difficult to untangle reproduction from people’s everyday concerns, and this is not only true for the infertile.

By describing and analysing what people in Spey Bay think about the ethics of reproduction and ART, this book questions whether public commentators, journalists, and politicians have grasped the complexity and thoughtfulness of the responses to these technologies of people who have no personal involvement in them—and why they are important. Charis Thompson has discussed the “public domain of bioethics” in her study of ART in the United States. She writes,

The British have a habit of putting prominent individuals from various domains—members of the proverbial “Great and the Good”—on committees that produce recommendations about matters of public concern that can lead to regulatory capacity. And in Britain, it is still possible for a single prominent expert in the field to become an honored and well-known public spokesperson.22

Thompson contrasts this with the American context, where she says that whilst “in some sense . . . the public is saturated with reproductive technologies,” through fictional and popular depictions of them in soap operas, novels, and magazine articles (which could also be said of the UK), “conspicuously missing is anything
approaching an agora of ideas where the public can openly and equally discuss the pros and cons of reproductive technologies. Indeed, it is hard even to imagine what the space, the technologies of dissemination, mitigation, and aggregation, and the rhetorics of this agora might be.”

She then goes on to analyse the importance of various iterations of the ethic of privacy in maintaining this absence of agora in the American context.

Thompson’s point about privacy and her implication that relying on those affected by infertility to be pioneers of the technologies’ development will probably lead to greater stratification is very important. I would only add that I am unsure how successful attempts to create such a public domain in the UK have been as well. The problem is that public discussions of reproductive ethics have been more about setting moral prescriptions and legal proscriptions than reflecting people’s rich ethical deliberations. I would suggest that the agora is ill equipped for understanding reproductive ethics, as it has little interest in recognising the contingent and processual nature of ethics or in knowing the contexts in which we make ethics from the bottom up. This is a problem for how we think about ART now and in the future, and it is one that this book speaks to directly.

In this book, I depart from the bioethical approach to reproduction and ART by emphasising the contingent and contextual nature of ethics and by working from the assumption that, in everyday life and in reproduction, ethics is constantly made. I am much less interested in trying to provide a definitive account of people in Spey Bay’s reproductive ethics than in following the making of their ethical judgements and how these connect with their everyday ethical values and priorities. The approach I am taking, led by my data, is more akin to an ethics of care approach, which, as Annemarie Mol and colleagues have noted, is different from that of medical ethics or bioethics, in that it “never sought to answer what is good, let alone to do so from the outside.” This is an approach that recognises that in people’s everyday lives, ethics is not so much about abstract moral reasoning but about taking other perspectives into account and
considering how any decision affects all those involved.\textsuperscript{26} It is a way of looking at the world through interrelation and connection rather than in neat divisions.

\textit{Thanks for All the Fish}

This ethnography is unusual not only in that it relates the ethical views of people who have no personal involvement in ART but also in that this is a group of people who are used to thinking and talking about ethics, nature, humanity, and the future as they go about their everyday lives. Whilst focused on a small and particular group of people, this book carries questions of how humans should reproduce themselves onto a much wider terrain than does existing work on reproductive ethics and ART. People in Spey Bay think about nature and the limits of the natural on a quotidian basis and this is, as I hope to show through this ethnography, fertile ground for thinking about reproduction and how it connects with other aspects of life. In the remainder of this chapter, I will introduce the context for this project, by starting to describe Spey Bay, the people who work and live there, and their everyday concerns, before ending with an outline of the book’s structure.

Spey Bay is a tiny village in the county of Moray (pronounced: \textit{Murrie}) in northeast Scotland. It is perched at the mouth of the River Spey on the picturesque Moray Firth coast, a place at times windy and spindrift-flecked, at others a tranquil, sunny haven. Here the Spey’s peat-browned freshwater, filtered through the Cairngorm Mountains, reaches the end of its long journey in a cataclysmic encounter with the chilly saltwater of the North Sea. Being at the confluence of a powerful river and a churning sea, the sand and shingle banks of the bay are in constant flux, with the river’s force constantly hewing fresh margins to its passage.

The village of Spey Bay lies within a 450-hectare nature reserve, beside the Speyside Way long-distance footpath. Spey Bay
Figure 2. Map of Spey Bay and the surrounding area. Illustration by Rhiannon Williams.
is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and the Inner Moray Firth is a Special Area of Conservation because of its population of bottlenose dolphins, which are thought of as vulnerable because they are a small group and because they reproduce slowly, and a Wetland of International Importance because it is a breeding ground for various rare birds including osprey, which were once extinct in the UK. The Spey is also home to a population of Atlantic salmon, which provided the original reason for the area’s settlement. Drawn close to the coast by the salmon, trout, and other fish in the river, dolphins and whales are regularly spotted along the firth, especially during the spring and summer. The human inhabitants of the villages along the coast associate themselves with dolphins on village name signs and in the decor and products of local businesses. Moray’s scenic coastline, rare wildlife, and dramatic landscape all contribute to a common sense that it is an altogether more natural place offering a better way of life. This implies a critical contrast with other parts of the country, typically more suggestive than literal, but that plays into long-established rhetorical rivalries between the country and the city in British culture.

Spey Bay is tucked away from other settlements, usually approached by a winding five-mile road alongside the Spey from Fochabers (see Figure 2). During my time living there, I became familiar with the sense of being enclosed by a ring of warmth and intimacy and the shift of perspective onto the small scale of my immediate surroundings once in Spey Bay. The road to Spey Bay marks both a phenomenological and spatial boundary. Inside, I felt part of something—something different and, implicitly, better. Many times whilst I was walking along the beach, collecting logs for the fire or feeding Sophie’s chickens, a passing visitor would remark on how lucky I was to live there.

The immediate presence of the sea once you arrive in Spey Bay also makes it feel like a frontier. Coastal Moray is roughly bi-seasonal, seeming to come alive in the spring and summer, when migrating birds start to return, dolphin sightings begin, and the first wave of tourists visit, whilst during the long...
autumn and winter it closes in on itself and your willingness to stay through the cold, dark nights is testament to your status as a resident rather than a visitor. The daily weather in this corner of the world is changeable and highly localised. One week in Spey Bay in late March 2007, for example, opened with gale-force winds, horizontal snow, and extremely rough seas, but a few days later I was eating lunch outside in mild sunshine. Locals know how to manage themselves in the climate and can find beauty in a boiling sea or a fog-bound beach.

In contrast to the Highlands that border it, which are visible across the firth on fine days, Moray enjoys fertile and productive land and great swathes of the area are set aside for agriculture; this is particularly evident in the low-lying area of coastal Moray from Fochabers to Brodie called the Laich of Moray. The palette of the place is more varied than the browns, greens, and purples of the Highlands, with bright yellow broom and coconut-scented gorse visible for much of the year, the ever-changing silver-grey-blue swirl of the sea, the pink pebbles and yellow-peach sands of the beaches, and the primary colours of the fishing boats in the harbours. People frequently referred to Spey Bay and Moray as places of natural beauty. When they did so, they were referring to emotion and embodied experience as much as aesthetic appreciation. A beautiful landscape in this case conjures up images of being outdoors, looking out to sea, feeling the wind and sun on your face, contemplating the distant hills, and appreciating the flora and fauna, which goes along with the sense that this is a place where people have more time to appreciate their surroundings, whether that be land, animals, plants, or other people. People here feel that they live closer to the natural world, an idea that is not only deeply fulfilling since, as we shall see, they value nature so highly, but also promotes action, since there is a sense that having all this on your doorstep makes the imperative to care for the environment all the more pressing. Living in a naturally beautiful place is a responsibility.

Spey Bay was built on salmon fishing and golf. Tugnet, at one end of Spey Bay, was, as the name indicates, the base for a
large fish-processing operation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Salmon fishing at Tugnet started in the twelfth century, with people fishing on the river from handmade coracles as well as from the shore. In the sixteenth century, the landowner the Duke of Gordon expanded the fishing operation to supply the English market. By then, men fished from slightly larger boats called cobles. There has never been a harbour at Spey Bay, but a salmon fishing station with accommodation for the staff was built in 1768 and the buildings still stand today. It employed one hundred and fifty people at its peak.

In the eighteenth century the industry turned to transporting fresh salmon packed in ice, and an icehouse, reputed to be the largest in Scotland, was built in Tugnet in 1791 and expanded in 1830. It was used to store the ice, cut from the river in winter, in which the fish were packed before being sent south to London on the railway which ran along the Moray Firth coast and stopped just south of Spey Bay itself. Although salmon is not fished on an industrial scale on the Spey anymore and the train line has long been out of commission, the deep-sea fishing industry is still active along the coastline of Moray and Aberdeenshire, though it has changed much in recent decades. Unfortunately I did not come into contact with those who worked in fishing except for the occasional encounter with retired fishermen visiting Spey Bay, who sometimes remarked with wistful authority upon the number of times they had seen dolphins and whales bow-riding whilst out fishing, but Jane Nadel-Klein has written about the local fishing communities here.

The Tugnet salmon fishing operation closed in the 1990s, but this same complex of ashlar buildings is still the home of the largest employer in the village and one of the most popular tourist attractions in northeast Scotland, a wildlife centre that was opened by a local couple in 1997 and is now run by an international cetacean conservation charity. I learned much of the history of Tugnet fishing from staff at the wildlife centre, who tell it to visitors as they take them on tours around the icehouse. The wildlife centre operates on a nonprofit basis and is
staffed by a handful of paid employees plus volunteers. The contrasts between fishing and cetacean conservation suggest much about the way that employment and industry have changed in this village and in the wider area, as the Moray Firth coast has gradually shifted from being focused on the fishing industry to becoming associated with leisure and tourism, which reflects a wider decline in manufacturing and an increase in tourism in the national economy of Scotland. One survey from 2009 found that the financial value of whale- and dolphin-watching tourism in the Moray Firth area is over £10 million. Other surveys show that there is generally a favourable attitude towards cetaceans and their conservation in Scotland: 80 percent of Scots surveyed supported the idea of introducing a specific law to protect cetaceans and 40 percent agreed that if a politician proposed such a law they would see her or him in a more favourable light.

The Save the Whale campaign was one of the first and in many ways defining moments in the history of the twentieth-century Green movement. The state of whales and dolphins is treated as metonymic of the environment and cetaceans continue to be one of the most popular conservation causes. One reason for the success of this particular cause is the fact that dolphins and whales are “charismatic megafauna” and popularly thought of as benign (or even altruistic), intelligent, social, and family oriented. In the Moray Firth area, the local population of over one hundred bottlenose dolphins are metonymic not only of the place but of people’s ethical, political, and social values. Just as Rebecca Cassidy showed in her exemplary study of horseracing society in Newmarket, this kinship between people and dolphins in Spey Bay is a manifestation of the fact that Western people can in fact reach across the human-animal divide. In Spey Bay this kinship is with wild animals rather than domesticated ones, but dolphins and whales also provoke people to reconsider their own place in, and relationship to, nature.

Whales and dolphins are very important in the identity of people in this area, but their meanings have certainly shifted over the centuries. During my fieldwork, I had assumed that
this friendly association between people and cetaceans was a relatively recent phenomenon that had emerged alongside the decline in North Sea fishing and the mainstreaming of concerns about the environment. Certainly these factors are important to contemporary ideas about cetaceans and especially to their ethical value. However, this interest does seem to have historical precedents. Marine biologist E.C.M. Parsons has argued that the number of carvings of “Pictish beasts,” which appear to be cetaceans, and probably dolphins, on standing stones in northeast Scotland indicates that cetaceans have been culturally significant in Scotland since the Iron Age. Parsons suggests that Saint Columba’s encounter with a strange creature that later became thought of as the Loch Ness Monster (or, more likely, one of its antecedents) may in fact have been a whale in the Moray Firth. He also says that the unicorn that features on Scotland’s Royal Crest is likely to be inspired by sightings of narwhals that could have ranged as far as the waters around Scotland in the chilly climate of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Though I am a little sceptical about gauging cultural meanings from such slight evidence, I must admit that these examples are appealing. Whatever the historical veracity of these claims, the efforts some contemporary researchers have gone to in order to find links between humans and cetaceans in Scotland does at the very least reinforce the deep significance that these animals have today.

Making a Home

The former Tugnet fishing station is a square courtyard of one- and two-storey buildings, just a few metres from the Spey mouth to its west and the sea to the north. The former station manager’s house flanks the courtyard entrance (see Figure 3) and looks not to the sea but south along the Spey to Ben Rinnes, whose 841 metres I once climbed with some of my friends from Spey Bay shod, despite the snow, in nothing more specialist than wellington boots. The house has now been split in two and Sophie, the
wildlife centre manager, rented the smaller of these houses and the charity that runs the wildlife centre rented the house next door as accommodation for the residential volunteers. When I moved to Spey Bay I lived in the volunteer accommodation for around six months and then moved in with Sophie next door after her housemate Steve bought a flat in the nearest city, Elgin. Two families live in the two other houses in the courtyard. Next to the volunteers’ accommodation is the wildlife centre office and, beyond that, the centre, wildlife garden, and café. The buildings are owned and let by The Crown Estate.

Apart from the wildlife centre, the only other public facility in Spey Bay itself is the village hall, which is the venue for community events and leisure activities such as quiz nights, ceilidhs, and yoga classes. People sometimes voiced disappointment that there is no pub in the village, and thus no social focal point. There is a hotel, but during my fieldwork it was closed, though golfers could use its course. The nearest pub and food shop are in Garmouth, on the other bank of the Spey. However, they are only nearest as the crow flies or if you are walking—by road, the closest amenities are in Fochabers, five miles inland. Fochabers, with a population of around two thousand, is home to the Baxter’s food manufacturing business and also has a primary school and high school, doctor’s surgery, veterinary practice, pubs, grocery stores, two butchers, a fish and chip shop, a handful of other independent shops, and two churches.

Throughout this ethnography, I use “people in Spey Bay” as a shorthand for all those I met, spoke to, and got to know during fieldwork, whether or not they actually lived in the village of Spey Bay and whether or not we were actually in Spey Bay at the time of each particular event or conversation recounted. Whilst this shorthand relies on a little literary license, it does reflect the fact that Spey Bay is where I was based for fieldwork and that I met most people there or through other people I had met there. It also captures the way in which Spey Bay and the work of the wildlife centre there epitomise the ethical values that inform how people make good lives here. Throughout the book, I will
mention where particular individuals live and where they come from in order to try to remind the reader that this is not an isolated community of people born and bred in Spey Bay.

Sophie was the social lynchpin of the group of people I met during fieldwork. She grew up in rural northwestern England and went to university in Scotland. She spent the years in between graduating and moving to Spey Bay working in various charities in the UK and abroad. She enjoys hiking, cycling, wildlife-watching, and other outdoor pursuits but also modern art, world music, and foreign cuisine. Sophie had lived in Spey Bay for four years when I first met her and was never short of superlatives to describe the place. When I asked her if she felt that Spey Bay was her home she agreed emphatically, adding that what was important was that she felt at home there.

Figure 3. Tugnet viewed from the Speyside Way, looking northwest. The main building in the centre of the picture is the former fishing station manager’s house, in which I lived during fieldwork. The single-storey building to its left is the back entrance to the wildlife centre, and to the left of that, with the three humps on the roof, is the icehouse. The Spey mouth lies just beyond the icehouse and the beach is on the other side of the buildings. Photo by author.
Sophie is an extremely warm, enthusiastic person who devotes most of her time and energy to doing things for other people, and she was notorious for her tendency to spontaneously invite people to dinner or to stay at her house, which I quickly became accustomed to after I moved in with her myself. One of my foremost mental images of Spey Bay is her orange sherbet-coloured sitting room with its flickering open fire, Indian throws for curtains, disco ball, multicoloured rug, large and well-used dining table, huge stacks of CDs, and hookah pipe in one corner. On the walls were a poster of a turtle, a memento of a Caribbean conservation project she had worked on, a framed photograph of the north Highlands where she spent family holidays as a child, a world map annotated by hand with notes of her and her friends’ travels, and a felt painting of a tern made by a friend and former colleague who had settled in the area after falling in love with a local man.

The colleagues and friends who worked in the wildlife centre would often eat together in each other’s houses after work or on the weekends. These were usually short-notice, informal gatherings, and both Sophie’s house and the volunteers’ accommodation next door had something of a tacit open-door policy, with a steady flow of people dropping in through the day. At these shared meals, food came from mixed sources including supermarkets, organic veg-boxes, the local butcher, and people’s own gardens. People would make a variety of dishes to cater to the differing tastes and dietary requirements of guests, and typically individuals would contribute different dishes or bring drinks to spread cost and labour. The efforts that went into these meals are exemplary of the ethic of care that people in Spey Bay enact in their daily interactions with each other, whilst the complicated choreography of sourcing these meals offers a microcosmic view of living in a consumer society whilst also attempting to resist some of those values.

Friends in Spey Bay are expected to be closely involved in each other’s lives and to share confidences, and this is facilitated by the routine proximity in which they live and work. Spey Bay
is a very sociable place. As well as the steady stream of shared meals, there were regular parties and people would get together for day trips, walks, and even visits to the supermarket (which also saved on petrol). Friends were informal with each other in a way that is reminiscent of kin; teasing and joking were an important part of social life and reflect their close intimacy. Inevitably the other side to this is gossip, and people did occasionally complain about information that they had told others in confidence somehow finding its way into public circulation. Trusting outsiders or newcomers with sensitive information was also a means of testing the boundaries of the group. If people could accept the more negative aspects of life in such a close-knit community, with few secrets and a limited range of cultural activities, that suggested that they could fit in there. Individuals were conceptualised as living in overlapping networks of reciprocity and mutual support and were encouraged to “be themselves,” however eccentric or singular that self may be. Of course, certain differences were less likely to be tolerated, such as climate change scepticism, but differences in ethnic origin, sexual orientation, age, or socioeconomic background were generally accepted as part of life and, indeed, what make people “interesting.”

Despite this self-conscious embracing of diversity, the people I met during fieldwork are a very homogenous group. Though staff and volunteers in the wildlife centre come from across the UK, Western Europe, and North America, almost all were white and middle class. A handful had been in single-sex relationships and/or did not identify as heterosexual, though as I will note in later chapters, when I talked with those who did not have children about their plans for future parenthood they assumed that they would have children within a heterosexual relationship. One unusual feature of this group, given that one of the things they have in common is their work, is that women are in the majority. As I will discuss further in the next chapter, the vast majority of the paid staff and most of the residential volunteers at the wildlife centre were women, though the local volunteers,
who help out on a less frequent basis, were more evenly split in gender. Most of the paid staff and residential volunteers were in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties, whilst the local volunteers were either similar ages or in their fifties to sixties.

As this is an ethnographic study, I did not seek a representative sample and in many ways the strength of this particular case is its specificity. It is worth briefly noting the demographic profile of the area, though, to give a broader sense of this region. The following figures are taken from the most recent census, in 2011.44 Whilst in terms of age, marriage, and gender statistics Moray’s profile is very similar to the picture for Scotland as a whole, it is quite different in terms of the ethnicity and nationality of residents. So, whilst 4 percent of the population in Scotland are Asian or Black, in Moray just over 1 percent are. Notably, the number of white migrants in Moray is also lower than for Scotland as a whole. Given these figures, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is such little ethnic diversity amongst people working in the wildlife centre. At the centre, Scottish people were in the minority and only one person had grown up in Moray. The most recent census shows that in Moray, just under 78 percent are “White—Scottish,” whilst 18 percent are “White—other British.” For Scotland as a whole, by comparison, 84 percent are “White—Scottish” and just under 8 percent are “White—other British.” A major reason for this preponderance of non-Scottish Britons in the county is the presence of Royal Air Force (RAF) personnel and their families at RAF Lossiemouth and RAF Kinloss (the latter of which has since become an army barracks). A handful of staff and volunteers in the wildlife centre were the female partners of men who work in the RAF, but Moray is also known as a place that people from elsewhere in the UK retire to.

The perception that living in the countryside is beneficial to people’s well-being is a longstanding one in the UK, and moving to a more rural location with a “slower” pace of life and beautiful landscape is a common aspiration, though it is of course one that appeals most to people who feel comfortable in the countryside.
and is only accessible to people who can find work there or have independent means. Survey figures from around the time that I was in Moray found that half of British people living in urban areas wanted to move to the country, whilst only one in ten rural residents would prefer to live elsewhere.\textsuperscript{45} In his study of English migrants to Scotland, Murray Watson analysed participants’ multilayered reasons for moving.\textsuperscript{46} Many of these resonate with those of people here, suggesting that their motives for seeking a good life in Spey Bay overlap with popular perceptions of what life in Scotland is like. In particular, many of his respondents identified Scotland as a place where you can get away from the fast pace and pressures of urban British life to enjoy a better way of living\textsuperscript{47} and cited the landscape and scenery of Scotland as a motivating factor in their migrations.\textsuperscript{48}

In terms of understanding the context in which I did this research, it is important to remember that my main period of fieldwork ended shortly before the global financial crisis took hold. At the time, there were rumours of a “credit crunch,” but it was still another year before Lehman Brothers went into administration and the bailout of Royal Bank of Scotland Group PLC and other banks in the UK. The crisis of the time seemed not so much financial as political, or existential, with the War on Terror looming large in the collective psyche. The 7/7 attacks on the London public transport system happened in 2005, whilst I was preparing to start my fieldwork, and car bomb plots targeting two sites in London and Glasgow International Airport were foiled in June 2007, not long before I returned to London. Though no one told me that they had moved to Spey Bay to get away from the risk of terrorist attacks, they did feel that it was safer in the countryside\textsuperscript{49} than in cities, and in my field notes in the days following the foiled attempt to bomb Glasgow airport I noted how relieved I was to be in a place that was highly unlikely ever to be targeted by terrorists.

The decision to move to Moray for the people I met there was primarily a positive choice towards achieving certain goals rather than away from an unpleasant past. This goes along with
their more general orientation towards the future rather than the past, which contrasts with many other British communities that have been described by ethnographers. For instance, in *Born and Bred*, Jeanette Edwards describes Bacup, Lancashire, as a place in which the present is scarred by memories and imaginings of its industrial past, manifested in both nostalgia and anxiety about the future. She also shows that in many ways community is celebrated and sought there because people feel they have lost it. The idea of community can, then, often refer to a sense of endangerment, and in chapter 2 I will discuss the salience of environmentalist ideas about endangerment to reproduction and the future in Spey Bay. In Spey Bay, people’s ideas about community and relationships with others are influenced not by a sense of loss, a desire to recapture something from their past, or indeed a straightforward rejection of prevailing mores but instead part of a process of coming to belong somewhere and building connections to others in a place in which they quickly come to feel at home. In this case, community is more about conserving the conditions for a good future than re-creating a past idyll.

Internal migration within Britain is not especially unusual, particularly amongst middle-class people, who frequently move around to study and work. Though most people in Spey Bay have good relationships with their parents and siblings, the fact that many of them have moved away from their families demonstrates that their vision of a good life does not necessarily include living close to them, especially when there are supportive and like-minded friends on hand. One obvious drawback of being away from families for younger people is that their practical and material support is harder to access, including for example if they later come to have children themselves, though this did not seem to concern many of the people I knew, as they were currently more interested in finding personal fulfilment through their work and interests, although some single women did express minor concerns about their chances of meeting a future partner in Moray compared to that of their peers living in cities.
People in Spey Bay are looking to build good lives in a place that is not only quiet and beautiful but also relatively cheap to live in compared to much of the rest of the country. Some of them are just starting out, at the beginning of their careers, whilst some are starting again, after a relationship breakup, health problems, or unemployment.

Spey Bay was also a haven for people’s friends, who sometimes came to get away from their troubles in a place where they could treat each day as it comes. A friend of a friend of Sophie’s came to stay with her after suffering a relationship breakup and a broken neck in a car accident and ended up staying three months. During a conversation with Sophie about this friend, she told me, “It’s nice that coming to Spey Bay has made her start to think about settling down” and reflected that when she had come to Spey Bay herself in her mid-twenties, she realised that “although travelling is really good and fun, staying in one place, when it’s the right place and you have a job you love and people you love, can be the really amazing thing.” A good life is one that is both virtuous and enjoyable—the positive experience of intimate sociality is just as important as the area’s beauty, pace of life, and closeness to the natural world.

Friendship in Spey Bay is reminiscent of that between gay people in San Francisco as described by Kath Weston in her classic study. For some gays and lesbians, Weston argues, a relationship between friends or lovers that is envisaged to endure is expressed in terms of a “forever” that “represents neither a will to eternity nor an immutable biogenetic connection, but rather the outcome of the day-to-day interactions that organize a relationship.” As she says, “In this transformation of the dominant biogenetic paradigm for kinship, permanence in a relationship is no longer ascribed (‘blood is blood’), but produced.” As with the friendships between people here, it is the work that goes into making and maintaining them that becomes significant and that, in turn, makes the relationships ever more lasting and important. People in Spey Bay did differentiate between kinship and friendship, suggesting that each relationship is characterised
by different types of knowledge and that biogenetic kinship is supposed to bring a permanence that friendship may lack. Nonetheless, the intimate “warts and all” relationships that they have with their friends suggest both that this difference can be eroded to the point of meaninglessness and that kinship needs to be nurtured. So, whilst kin are supposed to always be there, all relationships are constantly made and remade. In Spey Bay, people’s friends are the ones who give them support on an everyday basis and in times of trouble and who know their flaws as much as their strengths. They are also the ones people enjoy spending most of their time with. Friends are the people who will help out when the septic tank develops a blockage and they are the ones who will share a well-earned drink with you after you have cleared it.

Many people in Spey Bay cannot claim belonging to the place through birth, but their ties with other people and the land are still vital to the feeling of being at home there. This suggests the importance of choosing responsibly in their visions of a good life and the significance of care and effort in the present and future, rather than the privileges of birth and history. In order to have a life that is better, people in Spey Bay prioritise the place and what it has to offer over their native ties, but the relationships they have in that place are vital to the enjoyment of a good life. Many would be happy for the geographical distance between themselves and their families to be shorter, yet at the same time, a certain amount of distance allows them to select and reject elements of mainstream society in order to build lives in which a certain amount of difference is positively appreciated. Of course, even in those places where people do have primordial links at their disposal, their employment of them is by no means predictable or straightforward and the facility to claim belonging or kinship using elements of both “given” and “made” knowledge is inherent in British models of kinship and identity. For people in Spey Bay, it is the work and care that go into cultivating and conserving links between people, and between people and place, that are vital to
maintaining good relationships, fostering a sense of belonging, and ultimately making a good life.

People in Spey Bay all take an interest in local issues, and those who have moved to Moray have made efforts to find out more about local history and culture, including attending folk music concerts and ceilidhs, trying Scottish food, and travelling around different parts of Scotland. But although they obviously think Scotland is a good place to make a good life, they tended not to fetishise Scottishness in the way that, for example, the North Americans, Australians, and South Africans with Scottish ancestors in Paul Basu’s study of roots tourists to Scotland did. There is, to be sure, anti-Englishness in Scotland, just as there is, like anywhere else, racism, sectarianism, homophobia, and sexism, but it is a minority pursuit. During my fieldwork in Spey Bay no one I knew was subject to any anti-English sentiment there, and in all the time I have spent working, travelling, and living in Scotland throughout my life, I have never experienced this kind of prejudice myself, though I know some who have. Although nationality is by no means a major focus of this book, it is, like anywhere else, part of the picture of life in Spey Bay. What should become clear is that there is fluidity to people’s identities here, and this is probably facilitated in part by the fact that Scotland is both a nation with a well-established, and frequently romanticised, identity and part of the United Kingdom (and, beyond that, the European Union [EU]).

Having said this, it is increasingly difficult to take unity between the British nations (and for that matter between the UK and EU) for granted. On 18 September 2014, whilst writing this book, I stayed up until 5 a.m. the next day watching the results of what had been hailed as a historic decision for the future of the country: the Scottish referendum on independence from the UK. At the time of writing, it remains to be seen what effects—social, political, economic, and constitutional—the 55 percent majority decision to stay part of the UK, the enthusiasm for change that Scottish people expressed during the campaign, the promises to deliver more devolved powers to Scotland (and the
other nations of the UK) by Westminster politicians, and the results of the UK General Election in May 2015 will each have on the Union’s future. In the referendum, 57.6 percent of the residents of Moray voted to stay in the UK. Northeastern Scotland has traditionally been the stronghold of the Scottish National Party (SNP), which was the main political party pushing for independence, so in some ways it is surprising that there was not more enthusiasm for independence amongst the residents of Moray, though other traditionally SNP areas including neighbouring Aberdeenshire also voted “no,” suggesting that the yes/no divide on independence did not in any simple way mirror party political allegiances.

The referendum on independence would never have been possible were it not for the SNP’s increasing success at national elections, which came to a head during my fieldwork when, on 3 May 2007, after the third election since the establishment of the devolved Scottish Parliament, they emerged as the first party, just ahead of Labour, and formed a minority government with then leader Alex Salmond as the first minister. They went on to win a landslide victory in 2011, giving them the first majority government in the history of the contemporary Scottish Parliament and enough confidence to secure the referendum on Scottish independence in September 2014. Although I do not think that many people I knew in Moray voted for the SNP in the 2007 election, they did feel let down by the Labour government and then prime minister Tony Blair in the wake of the Iraq War and so felt some sympathy for the SNP as an alternative to Labour, given their left-of-centre and social-democratic political stance. Some also specifically expressed approval of Moray’s SNP MP Angus Robertson’s take on environmental issues.

Themes of nationality, belonging, connection, and identity recur in the poetry of John Mackie, whom I got to know during my fieldwork. John is in his sixties. He was born in Garmouth, the village on the opposite bank of the Spey to Spey Bay, where his mother lived until her death at age 101. John spent some of his childhood and much of his adult life in London, as well
as living and working for some years in northern Africa. He returned to Moray with his wife, who was terminally ill, so that she could enjoy a healthier lifestyle in the final period of her life. After she died he decided to stay and he lives in Banff, Aberdeenshire, about a forty-minute drive from Spey Bay. In his poem “Ancestral Voices—A Polemical Rant on Scottish Identity,” he draws on the scattered locations of his ancestors, which traverse Scotland, England, and North America like a genealogical spider’s web. In the following passage, he expresses, through his ancestors, his own ideas about identity:

As we sit late in our high house in Banff,
once owned by a Polish grocer, ancestral voices
silent in their frames speak volumes
they say—Nationality is a construct, its foundations symbols
of a shared, often mythical, past—Identity
is more particular and proven.

John told me with some amusement that he had once recited “Ancestral Voices” at an informal SNP event and been told by audience members that it was a good example of nationalist poetry. Yet, in concluding, he reminds us that nationality, like any other aspect of identity, must be made and maintained through certain performances and rhetorical claims:

we polish and practice
the people we’ll be:
selecting from ancestral voices,
fashioning diversity.

John’s sense of the contingency of identity and belonging is particularly interesting given his status as a native of Moray with genealogical connections there that are clearly significant to him and that he could choose to foreground rather than question. What seems to be most important to him is the ongoing, and selective, feeling of connection in making identity and a sense of
belonging. In her description of feeling at home in Spey Bay that I recounted earlier, Sophie identified three aspects of her daily experience: the place, the work, and the people. The primary affect that she associated with this was love. People in Spey Bay have an affective kinship with their friends, though they also feel and care for the environment in which they live; these feelings and the ways they are made on an everyday basis will be dominant themes throughout the coming chapters.

**Caring for the Environment**

Everyone knows Allan, a retired resident of Spey Bay, who is often out walking his dog and his neighbours’ dogs too. Chris, my boyfriend at the time, had one notorious encounter whilst walking along the Spey in which Allan told him how fortunate he felt because his house, which overlooks the golf course, is “the highest house in Spey Bay” and so, he surmised, he would be the last remaining resident “when the seas rise.” Allan observed that most other houses in the village are situated around sea level, whilst his is a whole four metres above the sea. When Chris got back from his walk and recounted this to our friends in Spey Bay they were largely amused, though one asked rhetorically, “And who is he expecting to row out to his little island with food and everything to keep him going when this happens?”

Allan’s unsolicited comment about rising sea levels shows that climate change is a common concern amongst local residents, though people have different ideas about how they will be affected. The people who worked in the wildlife centre valued Allan as part of the local landscape, as “a character,” but also as a compassionate man who cares about animals and tries to help other people, however eccentric some of his ideas might be. In their response to his comments about being the only survivor in Spey Bay after the seas rise, they bowed to his proprietorial and authoritative vision of the future but managed to retain a place for themselves in the image of them taking supplies to him in
rowing boats, a rather poignant one for people involved in cetacean conservation. Whilst they are prepared to respect, and even prioritise, older and longer-standing residents’ claims to belonging, this shows the importance they place on their attachment to the place, such that they would not abandon it even in flooding, and their self-appointed role caring for others.

When I have discussed and written about my time in Spey Bay, people have often expressed surprise at the lack of conflict in my accounts. It is something that surprises me, too, as I am well aware of the fact that environmental campaigns can irritate and alienate some people and that activism about the natural world can lead to conflicts between “local” and “incomer” groups or “do-gooders.” During fieldwork, I spent most of my time with people who work in the wildlife centre and visitors, who not surprisingly have sympathy for the cause of cetacean conservation. So, through this association, I might simply have missed out on being exposed to the other side of the argument.

One possible reason for the lack of noticeable conflict between conservationists and locals here is that Moray is a place that attracts quite a few different incomers, who seem to settle into the community successfully. It may also be something to do with the specific case of Spey Bay: the wildlife centre is housed in a building that already existed and that might otherwise become derelict, it is free for all to visit, it provides the only café in the village, and visitors have little negative impact on the village, tending to arrive in small numbers, drive slowly through the village, and park their cars neatly in the wildlife centre car park. The fact that the wildlife centre also encourages local people to volunteer and that there are various initiatives to include local residents in their work also probably goes some way to building bridges. I did overhear local people referring to people from the wildlife centre collectively as “the dolphin people” a couple of times, which could be interpreted a number of ways, though I think it was not intended to be derogatory. I am sure that there are moments when people resent the fact that the wildlife centre employs so many people who are not from the local area or feel
that they are being preached to. Nonetheless, where I attend to
issues of conflict in this book, I focus much more on conflict
within individuals than between them—that is, on the ques-
tions, dilemmas, and internal conflicts that characterise trying
to make a good life, as this is what people talked about with me
much more.

Based on the conversations I did have with people other than
those who work and volunteer in the wildlife centre, anthropo-
genic climate change is a common concern in this part of the
world, and this is perhaps another reason why there was a lack
of obvious conflict between people in the community. Environ-
mental values have become mainstream in the twenty-first
century, and this has only intensified in the years since I began
my fieldwork. Environmentalism waxes and wanes in political
discourse and it has been somewhat eclipsed in recent years by
the economic crisis, but the environment remains an important
topic of discussion, not least since climate change has come to be
accepted as scientific orthodoxy.

In Britain, environmentalism has undergone a shift in iden-
tity from the Green movement towards ethical living. Ethical
living is a social movement that arose towards the end of the
last century, inspired by the Green movement and campaigns
for “sustainable” living. It is a largely individualised movement
in which people seek out information themselves about how
to lead a more “ethical,” or ecologically responsible, lifestyle.
Ethical living is guided by the principle of using natural re-
sources in a more environmentally sound or sustainable man-
ner and treating producers better—this is a movement that
calls for better business ethics and forms of consumption that
do the least harm to people, animals, and the environment.
Adherents can decide for themselves how far they wish, and
whether they can afford, to incorporate these principles into
their everyday decisions, but major areas of consideration for
those wishing to follow an ethical living lifestyle are the sour-
cing and provenance of food, reducing the use of fossil fuels
through making fewer private car journeys, reducing and
recycling household waste, using alternative forms of energy, reducing water usage, growing their own food, eating less (or no) meat, consuming Fairtrade brands, wearing ethical fashion, and using sustainable resources to build and equip homes. People in Spey Bay did not refer to themselves as explicitly following the ethical living movement, but much of their everyday practice was based in exactly these considerations. They also go beyond this by contributing to the cause of cetacean conservation, which could range from participating in litter picks on the beach to teaching children about the dangers of industrial pollution to carrying out wildlife surveys.

The obvious critique of ethical living is that it places too much emphasis on individual actions and lifestyle factors rather than on changing the structural conditions that create an ecologically unsustainable world. The longer-term goal of ethical living is one of harnessing consumer demand to effect change, as well as to inculcate “better” habits in increasing numbers of individuals and families (though some companies have been accused of “greenwashing” products by overstating their environmental credentials and ethical value). Ethical living could therefore be seen as a pragmatic attempt to change capitalism by talking back to it in its own language. We live in a consumer society so it is not surprising that we think about ethics in terms of consumption, just as in earlier times we thought about ethics more in terms of god, social respectability, or familial obligations. Ethical living is not radical, nor is it enough on its own, but it can be a part of a response to the challenges of a changing climate and exploitative business practices, not least in the way in which it raises awareness of issues like fossil fuel extraction, industrial farming, and sweatshop labour and in that it fosters an ethic that is more careful of others. Whilst ethical living can be, and repeatedly has been, criticized for pandering to middle-class preoccupations and being inaccessible to people with less flexibility in their spending power, the fact is that living a more “ethical” or environmentally friendly life can be financially, politically, and socially costly for anyone, precisely because the
world is currently organised in an unsustainable and environmentally destructive manner.

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa describes this as an “age of ethics,” in which both public debate and academic research have turned to focus on ethics. As she says, this can mean that political problems become subsumed into the private domain and appear a matter of personal choice. Puig de la Bellacasa argues that we should “interrupt” the association between personal ethical engagement and the private sphere and do more to foster collective ethico-political commitments. The environmentalist movement has, from its inception, been one driven by care, as encapsulated in the common phrase “caring for the environment.” I will return to questions of care, particularly in relation to work and gender, in later chapters, but here I would like to draw attention, following Puig de la Bellacasa, to the point that caring can also be a form of critique. So, whilst the ethicisation of life in this contemporary moment might, in some cases, be a move towards depoliticisation, this is not to say that there is no critical thinking behind such movements. Caring for the environment can be about pointing out historical contingency, challenging the status quo, and creating alternative visions of the future, and therefore deeply political. Similarly, ethical labour like the work that is done in the wildlife centre in Spey Bay is implicitly critical in that it seeks to fill in gaps in both social awareness and political will.

The fact that environmentalism asks something of everyone, from individuals to governments to corporations, and that it posits a cause constitutive of, yet bigger than, humanity is one of the reasons it is so challenging. Environmentalism by its very nature is a globalised phenomenon that transgresses and transcends the subdivisions people make of their worlds. As Marilyn Strathern has pithily put it, “A crisis perceived as ecological contains all.” It is a challenge for scholars of environmentalism because it is difficult to know how to pin down something that crosses national, species, ecological, and disciplinary boundaries. But then ethnographers have always studied economics and politics

For general queries, contact webmaster@press.princeton.edu
alongside kinship, cosmology, and ritual and so perhaps we are in fact fortuitously placed to study environmentalism, albeit in its local manifestations.71

Kay Milton, one of the early organising forces in the anthropology of environmentalism, describes environmentalism as a “social commitment” involved in a quest for a “viable future.”72 In the epigraph to her introduction to Environmentalism: The View from Anthropology, Milton quotes Timothy O’Riordan, who says, “Environmentalism is as much a state of being as a mode of conduct or a set of policies.”73 In this ethnography, I take the idea that environmentalism is a state of being, a mode of conduct (as well as a code for conduct), and a set of policies seriously, in relating how this group of people living in northeast Scotland make good lives. However, to describe them as environmentalists is, like any other label, somewhat misrepresentative. Some are so committed to the cause of animal welfare that they will make themselves vomit if they believe they have unwittingly eaten some animal-derived product. Some think that buying organic cow’s milk for their child is their main priority in being an ethical consumer. Some believe that pandas are not worth saving because they are too far gone down the road to extinction. Some use contraception because they believe it is irresponsible to add to the world’s population without proper planning. Calling someone an environmentalist does not necessarily tell us much about their gender politics or their take on foreign policy, let alone where they shop or how they vote. This is why I do not tend to locate the people I write about in this book in the environmental movement so much as in their geographical location. Spey Bay, as somewhere that represents both a good life and a place in which ethical labour is being done, is their ethical locus. What I am interested in exploring here is not so much what it means to be an environmentalist but what it means to be concerned about the future of nature, when nature is conceived as that which all species depend upon to survive and reproduce.

People in Spey Bay are a particularly interesting group to think and talk about reproduction with not only because they
have an explicit interest in nature but also because they think about ethics on an everyday basis. They understand ethics to be less about abstract moral principles and more about quotidian decisions. Taking an approach of caring for the environment is not only about reducing harms to other species or preventing the pollution of the natural world but also about seeing the world—and their own place in it—in a particular way. Environmentalism posits a world in which people are connected to others because they live in interdependent and meaningful relationships with them. Caring for the environment is not about subduing or mastering nature but living with it in a way that will secure a good future for all.

**A Merographic Map of the Book**

Just as Spey Bay is a place where the river meets the sea, *Making a Good Life* is an exercise in bringing things into relation, or making connections. In this book, I employ Marilyn Strathern’s concept of merographic connections—a Western knowledge practice in which one domain of knowledge is brought into relation with another in order to better understand it—as a methodological and conceptual tool in order to trace the flow of ethical values, relations, and substances in people’s thinking about reproduction. Indeed, Sarah Franklin argues, “Merographic thinking . . . is part of the conceptual equipment necessary to make IVF both thinkable and doable, indeed to make it workable at all.” Charis Thompson has described the “ontological choreography” that goes on in ART clinics, in which scientific and technological techniques dynamically combine with familial and conjugal relationships, gender politics, legal regulations, economic considerations, and clinical protocols. She says, “What might appear to be an undifferentiated hybrid mess is actually a deftly balanced coming together of things that are generally considered parts of different ontological orders (part of nature, part of the self, part of society).”
In this chapter, I have introduced some of the main themes of the book—making a good life, nature, ethics, and reproduction—and started to sketch what life in Spey Bay is like. One further theme that runs through the book is context, which is something I wish to play with as much as to theorise. This chapter has started to map the context of Spey Bay by describing the place and the feeling of being there and outlining some of the issues that preoccupy its inhabitants. In discussing merographic connections, Strathern talks about contexts rather than environments (though environmentalism is one of the many examples she takes up in her exploration of the condition of being “after nature”). Both “environment” and “context” refer to the setting within which an entity operates or exists, but context has the added element of aiding understanding. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, context is “the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood.” So it is that ethnographers see one of their main roles as making particular ideas and actions intelligible by putting them into context. One question that runs through the whole book is what it means to put things in context. In *After Nature*, Strathern explains that “the very desire to put facts ‘into their context’ is a merographic move. The context, by virtue of not being equivalent with the thing put into it, will ‘illuminate’ the thing from a particular angle (display one of its parts).” The fact that things can always be put into context and that there are a multitude of available contexts, of varying scales and depths, creates a sense of plurality; it seems that each new context will generate a new sense of perspective.

Each of the chapters in this book focuses on a particular aspect of reproduction. In chapter 1, this is the plans and aspirations for having children of the people who work in Spey Bay and do not have children. The chapter introduces the major theme of the “stable environment,” a term that was used by one mother, Erin, to describe the best conditions in which to have a child but that also provides a crucible for thinking about the connections between reproduction and the environment and about gender and ethics. This chapter focuses particularly on the relationship
between plans for parenthood and work and especially the effects of gender on both professional and parenting roles.

In this first ethnographic chapter, I introduce the term “ethical labour.” Ethical labour refers to activities and actions that are guided by particular ethical principles. I describe it as the work of caring and it includes formal actions like working for charitable causes as well as everyday acts of ethical self-fashioning such as consuming “ethical” products and conscious ethical actions like disposing of waste responsibly, instructing others in ethical virtues, or choosing one particular action over another because it appears more ethical. The use of the word “labour” is a deliberate reference to the fact that all of these actions are carried out in a context of advanced capitalism and neoliberalism—many of these actions resist or subvert these political and economic values, yet they are also difficult to extricate from them. “Labour” also relates to the fact that ethics are constantly being made. Of course, in making ethical decisions, we draw upon ethical principles and values, but these values are no more static than the people who are guided by them. A good life is only finished (if at all) at death.

Chapter 2 carries the theme of the stable environment out into the wider world by considering what it means to care about stabilising the natural environment in the interest of future generations. Much environmentalist thinking and rhetoric are concerned with preventing environmental degradation in order to secure a better future. This indicates the importance of reproduction—in humans and other parts of the natural world—in caring for the environment and working to prevent climate change. In this chapter, I will look in depth at the concerns that people in Spey Bay had about humans putting ourselves at risk of endangerment by destroying our natural environments and becoming overreliant on technology to create children.

This chapter also shows the salience of nature and naturalness to how people in Spey Bay think about reproduction, ethics, the future, and the environment. This point is taken further in the subsequent two chapters, the first of which focuses on birth and becoming a parent and the second on the ethical dilemmas provoked by surrogacy. In chapter 3, I analyse the importance of
ideas of nature to how people in Spey Bay think about gender differences in parenting and the ethics of care and responsibility in parenthood. As I discuss in chapters 3 and 4, one theme that emerged from my interviews with people in Spey Bay was a strong belief in the maternal bond, and in chapter 4 I discuss how this is challenged and complicated by surrogacy. Public debates in the UK have been characterised by a resilient sense that surrogacy presents unique ethical problems, and I show how for people in Spey Bay, ideas of naturalness act as ethical guides in navigating these problems. My aim in this chapter is also to articulate the nuance and willingness to sympathise with others that characterised people’s responses to ART.

A thread that runs from chapter 4 into chapter 5 is community. Community is, for people in Spey Bay, part of a good life and it is something that is constantly made. People in Spey Bay find community in their shared ethical interests and values, and this has an effect on how they think of themselves as well as how they relate to the environment in which they live. Ethics is not only about doing the right thing as an individual but also about how they live their lives and what they want their lives to be. Ethnographies of Britain have demonstrated the importance of ideas of community in this country, nowhere more pertinently to this case than in Jeanette Edwards’s book *Born and Bred*, which is rare in the attention it pays to what reproduction means to people’s sense of how they relate, and are related, to others and in its emphasis on the ways in which attitudes to ART flow beyond individual or conjugal identities into local, regional, and national communities. In chapter 4 I discuss how ideas about altruism in surrogacy relate not only to individual ethical decision making but also to a sense of community and shared identity. In chapter 5, I extend the discussion of surrogacy by focusing on how people in Spey Bay thought about paying for bodily services and substances and what they felt this said about them as members of a community.

The final chapter is in some ways a conclusion, as it returns to the overarching themes of the book, yet it is not intended to sum
up, so much as to suggest further shakes of the kaleidoscope. This is in keeping with the book’s aim of showing, both in its content and its structure, that both life and ethics are constantly made but also a recognition of the fact that this book is just one, partial account of life in Spey Bay. This point is also reflected in the subchapters that come in between each chapter. These reflection sections, as I have come to think of them, are partly inspired by a similar narrative device used by Timothy Choy in his ethnography of Hong Kong environmentalism, _Ecologies of Comparison_. Whilst air was Choy’s primary element, mine is water and so, like the constantly changing play of sunlight on water, these sections present other aspects of life in Spey Bay drawn from my observations, in turn suggesting new perspectives on the themes of the main chapters. These reflection sections also provide me with a space in which to consider the ethic, and ethics, of ethnography by reflecting on my own relations to Spey Bay and its various inhabitants. As Thom van Dooren has observed, placing ourselves in the worlds we describe means we have a stake in them and may be held accountable for our accounts of them.

_Making a Good Life_ examines what nature, ethics, and reproduction mean to people in Spey Bay whilst keeping these three aspects of life in constant contact. Each shifts in and out of focus like the pieces of a kaleidoscope, and some of the connections may seem absurd, but the serious point I wish to get across is the preposterousness of treating reproduction as if it were separate from the rest of life. Merographic connections both describe and make contexts. They create a sense of plurality and diversity, but as Franklin has pointed out, there is also an “analogic return” in this process. The meanings that are made through merographic connections travel back from one domain to the other with which they have connected, like waves cresting and hitting the shore. And just as when the river meets the sea, the potency of such connections lies not just in the internal logics of each domain but in the effects of their connection: freshwater meets saltwater, salmon meets dolphin . . .