INTRODUCTION

Why ethnography?

Ethnographers are social scientists who undertake research and writing about groups of people by systematically observing and participating (to a greater or lesser degree) in the lives of the people they study. Ethnographers value the idea of 'walking a mile in the shoes' of others and attempt to gain insight by being in the same social space as the subjects of their research. Ethnography has historically been most closely associated with anthropology and qualitative sociology, and has focused on the indigenous, the exotic, the subaltern, the disadvantaged; in other words, people who stood as some sort of 'other' to the well-educated and well-resourced Westerners who dominated the practice of early ethnography. The later decades of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first century, have seen ethnography throw off these stereotypical images, and it is now impossible to understand ethnography as the study of the exotic 'other'. Ethnographers study across and within cultures and societies, at home and away. Ethnography is practised by a growing range of social science disciplines and is being used in domains beyond, such as marketing and journalism; ethnography is no longer a jealously guarded 'possession' of anthropology. And, like other social science approaches, ethnography is searching for ways to remain useful and relevant in a rapidly changing world.

Ongoing relevance

In this book I argue for the continuing significance of ethnographic research in our diffuse global world system. Globalisation has involved massive

movements of people, information and goods, and has dissolved all sorts of older cultural, social, economic and political barriers. These global flows have triggered renewed localised identifications as humans strive to find their particular place in a rapidly changing world order. Yet much of what we might term 'classical' ethnographic practice is still as purposeful as it was a century ago when Malinowski and Boas used ethnographic research to begin the formation of two key anthropological traditions in Britain and the United States of America. The study of the particulars of everyday human existence is an ongoing task for ethnographers today, and the bulk of this book will be dedicated to a critical overview of the formative theories and practices that have kept ethnography as purposeful as it was 100 years ago. I want to suggest, however, that if ethnography wants to remain relevant into the future it must find ways to understand how contemporary local identities are networked in a global system, and it must strive to understand the place of technology-mediated sociality in today's social and cultural systems. If ethnography's strength has been its ability to appreciate the social and cultural particulars of human existence, it now needs to also appreciate these particulars as part of a global human complex. The current generation of 'digital natives' who socialise in cyberspace and maintain friendships via mobile telephones are an obvious example of the changing landscape of society and culture that ethnographers are confronted with. How an ethnographer studies humans and social settings that do not have face-to-face interactions is a challenge for cyber-ethnography that I will revisit at the conclusion of this book.

The author

An aspect of this journey into ethnography will be to understand the role of the ethnographer and how their personal story plays out in the research they undertake. I approach questions about the 'ethnographer as author' with what I call a methodological reflexivity. There is a need to account for the inevitability of the ethnographer's influence on the research process and to manage the tension between objectivity and subjectivity in order to produce better portraits of the human condition. Dealing rigorously with reflexivity is an important aspect of contemporary ethnography. In this vein it is appropriate to say something about the person who brings you this encounter with ethnography.

I am an anthropologist who was trained in a combined anthropology and sociology department. No doubt as a consequence of this I have never made much of the distinction between qualitative sociology and

anthropology, and do not propose to alter my lack of enthusiasm for boundary policing in this book. If one looks to methods one can find grounds for distinction between these areas of study, but this is not of primary interest here, as the focus will be on an ethnographic approach that is utilised across these disciplines and beyond. I am primarily interested in exploring why we might want to undertake ethnography, and how we can do it well.

I carried out my doctoral fieldwork in rural western Victoria, Australia. My research was concerned with the relationship between the region's European descendants (predominantly English, Scottish and Irish who initially settled in the area in the 1840s to 1860s) and the local Aboriginal population. The project was a mixture of Aboriginal anthropology and rural sociology and was driven by a theoretical concern with the concept of 'culture'. I wanted to locate this theoretical pursuit in a concrete setting that could problematise 'culture' and lead to a more critical understanding of the uses and abuses of this foundational term in the social sciences (Madden, 1999, 2003). I also had a personal reason for undertaking this research; the region I chose to study was also my natal home. I lived in Western Victoria until I was 20 years old, at which point I left for Melbourne in search of employment and opportunities. My fieldwork was in part an experience of returning to home (see Madden, 1999; for more on 'anthropology at home' also see Jackson, 1987 and Messerschmidt, 1981).

My research into Aboriginal–European relations was partly driven by the fact that my home area's Aboriginal population was almost unknown to me when I lived there; the geographic closeness of the two communities did not lead to a ready dissolution of social boundaries. There were always exceptions to this social segregation, but by and large the region's 'Whitefella' and 'Blackfella' populations had rather constrained and limited social interactions. It was possible to live parallel existences. This deficit in my understanding of the social and cultural profile of my own natal community was a strong motivating factor behind my desire to undertake an ethnographic project in my home, and using this motivation constructively was one of the subjective influences I had to learn to manage. I expected that in undertaking an ethnographic project at home I would find the familiar in my own natal non-indigenous culture, and the unfamiliar in the local Aboriginal community. These presuppositions were challenged by some of my early experiences in the field and this early, naive, almost bumbling ethnographic endeavour was nevertheless one of the more illuminating phases of my research. Doing ethnography inverted my expectations, challenged my assumptions and forced a critical rethink of ideas I had held to be unproblematic, teaching me valuable lessons in the process.

These lessons are a useful starting point in answering the question 'Why ethnography?' My experiences in this research phase will be revisited often in this book as I present examples of my successes and failures in the field.

Subsequent to my doctoral studies, I worked as an applied anthropologist in the 'Native Title' sector in Australia (where Aboriginal land claims are examined and attempts are made to resolve them). The role of anthropologists in this domain is to gather anthropological and historical information on the rights and interests Aboriginal communities may or may not have to tracts of land they claim under the Australian Native Title Act. This work is typically rapid ethnography, it requires a strong understanding of the legal and bureaucratic context behind each case, and is inevitably politically charged, given that local, state and national governments are some of the most important and well-resourced stakeholders in the process. In this setting I came to appreciate the potential and limitations of ethnography done under time pressures and understand how ethnographic perspectives can engage in a useful conversation with other epistemologies or ways of constructing knowledge (for example, legal and/or bureaucratic approaches). It was interesting to see how useful an ethnographic approach could be in these ultimately legal, bureaucratic and political land claim processes. The lessons I learnt in the rigours of applied ethnographic research will also be revisited from time to time in this text. The examples I draw on will be of relevance to budding ethnographers entering the rapidly expanding world of applied ethnographic research. The experiences I had as an applied anthropologist also act as a corrective; the ethnographic endeavour is not a limitless world of possibility. The fact that applied ethnography is typically produced in political, legal, economic and personal circumstances that constrain the nature of the research is important to note.

I have also taught ethnographic methods and applied anthropology subjects to second-and third-year university students for a number of years. Of particular interest have been the hundreds of small ethnographic research projects I have supervised and assessed. I remain fascinated by the variety of settings in which students undertake their ethnographic projects: pubs, senior citizen centres, migrant resource centres, sporting clubs, public transport facilities, student associations, political associations, cafes, urban, suburban and rural networks, indeed almost anywhere people gathered into some form of recognisable social group. These semester-long (term) exercises crystallised some of the key moments in the ethnographic endeavour. They taught students about project proposal and design, entering the field and gaining access to participants, the ethical dimensions of ethnographic research, participant observation, interviewing and note-taking, analysis

and interpretation, and finally, writing up and finding the ethnographic 'story' in their data. They also taught me that certain sorts of experiences and insights crop up time and time again in the early stages of the ethnographer's career, and I hope to pass on some of these lessons in this book.

These student projects constitute a wealth of information on the trials and tribulations of doing ethnography. Almost all of the students had difficulties at one or more stages in their projects, but they had to find ways to resolve them before the submission date (no different to what occurs in the so-called real world of professional ethnographic work). Some students were tempted to do an ethnographic methods subject because they liked the *idea* of ethnography, but then found that the face-to-face negotiations and the everyday politics of ethnographic engagement were something they were not comfortable with. This a timely reminder that while ethnographers strive to develop natural, easy and trusting relations with participants, doing ethnography is really a rather strange way to be with other people. It is not for everyone. Some students struggled to find their ethnographic story, and wondered what it was that tied their research activities together into a useful insight into their group and the human condition. When these students reached what I call a 'light bulb' moment, when the key theme of their ethnography suddenly shone out of the fog of uncertainty, they too met with that initial realisation I recall from my early studies – 'Now I get it! So that's why we do ethnography!' These teaching and learning experiences will not be referred to directly, but they infiltrate this text and influence the manner in which I present the mix of theories, practical advice, suggestions and questions that appear in each chapter.

In more recent times I have developed a research interest in the social relations that exist between humans and companion animals (or human animals and non-human animals, to use the preferred terminology). Like cyber-ethnography, these relationships pose some interesting challenges for classical ethnography. The rise of the companion animal in contemporary society has led to people forming a new kinship with animals based on shared social lives, shared domestic spaces and a growing sense of 'pets' as real members of human families. How do ethnographers tackle this social phenomenon? Are companion animals part the background field setting, like physical structures or the natural environment, or are they participants with agency and social roles worthy of proper ethnographic consideration? As with the example of cyber-ethnography, the human/animal question is one I will return to at the end of this book in order to critically examine the potential and constraints of an ethnographic approach.

The corpus of ethnographies and ethnographic textbooks that have informed and educated me will be a point of reference as we proceed. I do

not attempt anything like a comprehensive survey of the current state of
ethnographic literature, rather I will be selecting useful sources from a
body of work to contrast and compare to my own experiences (and those
of my students), extending the discussion beyond my own antipodean
experience and on to a global domain of practice and ideas.

A storied reality

I have a particular way of teaching an appreciation of ethnography, and
it reflects a certain bias towards the transformative ability of ethnography
when it is presented as a 'storied reality'. An ethnography is ultimately a
story that is backed up by reliable qualitative data and the authority that
comes from active ethnographic engagement. All ethnographers under-
take research in order to write or visually represent human groups or
institutions, and so a solid appreciation of ethnography requires an
understanding of the power, techniques and poetry of textual and visual
representation. I see the act of inscription (including image capture) as
a core element of ethnographic practice and I utilise a three-phase
approach that I refer to as 'writing down' (notes), 'writing out' (data)
and 'writing up' (text), but there's much more to consider besides. The
act of inscription needs to be seen as part of a larger narrative, one that
has its origin story, iconic characters and characterisations, and an inter-
esting and challenging future. Furthermore, ethnographic inscription is
informed by a larger body of practice and theory. The relationship
between the way we 'do' ethnography and the way we 'think about'
ethnography is one of the key targets of this text.

Doing plus thinking equals being

We are now in an era when anthropological and sociological writing has
well and truly articulated with literary theory; reflexivity and subjectiv-
ity are now commonplace, indeed expected, in the critical discussion of,
and pedagogy related to, ethnography. In this context there are two
dominant types of ethnography textbooks produced: (1) those that deal
mainly with the 'doing' of ethnography, listing the 'rules' and practical
considerations involved in ethnographic research, and (2) those influ-
enced by the reflexive turn, focusing mainly on bringing the personal,
subjective experiences of the ethnographer to the reading audience.
While this distinction has some logic in terms of differing textual strategies

and styles, it also has the tendency to compartmentalise the 'doing of' ethnography and 'thinking about' ethnography into two discreet processes, and to do so in a way that does not reflect the reality of the relationship between practice and theory. In this text I seek to combine general advice and tips for doing ethnography with reflections on theory and the subjective experience of ethnographic fieldwork to produce a text that articulates 'doing' and 'thinking' into a logical whole; an approach I call 'being ethnographic'. Reflections on ethnography are not just pre- and post-fieldwork musings or intellectual bookends for the 'real' business of doing research. Theory, reflection, musings, quandaries, inspirations and analytic leaps of discovery are all contemporaneous with the practice of doing ethnographic research. A text that seeks to convey the lived reality of ethnographic research should portray the interdependent relationship between doing and thinking which produces the state of 'being ethnographic'.

Layout and intent of the book

This book has nine chapters spread over four thematic sections which provide an overall introduction to ethnographic theories, methods and writing. It also seeks to provoke discussion and argument and point to the potential and limitations of an ethnographic approach to understanding the human condition. The book is a critical overview that can form the basis of a graduate course on ethnography. Along the way this book poses questions and makes suggestions for further reading that can complement this text and expand the learning experience. The questions posed at the end of the chapters will also reflect the approach I call 'being ethnographic', and will provide a series of queries that relate to the practical organisation of ethnographic research and the role of the ethnographer, as well as giving the chance to reflect critically on ethnography as a knowledge production system.

The first section of the book (Chapters 1 and 2) deals with the 'Key Concepts and Theoretical Frames' of ethnography. Chapter 1, '"Definitions", methods and applications', does not present a hard-and-fast definition of ethnography because the variability in the human condition and the different approaches of individual ethnographers make a rule-bound approach to defining ethnography impractical. Ethnography is a way of writing about people, a way of being with people, and in combination, a way of theorising about people. As a participant observer an ethnographer is both within and outside of the research process; she or he is both a researcher and

a research tool. Chapter 1 therefore also discusses embodiment and the role of reflexivity in contemporary ethnography. We then look at ethnographic methodology and discuss the important relationship between the theoretical and practical aspects of ethnography: how ideas and techniques combine to shape a practice. Ethnography also has an origin story, which typically begins in social anthropology and moves to urban sociology and then outwards to areas like cultural studies. We examine this narrative and ask the question, 'what has changed over the last century of ethnographic research?' Finally, this introductory chapter looks at the applications of ethnography and the ethical dimensions of ethnographic research, thus setting up a broad overview of the practice upon which the subsequent chapters can build.

Chapter 2, 'Ethnographic fields: home and away', argues that an ethnographic field is an emergent, contingent domain that comes into being when we systematically examine the social relations that bound or characterise a particular time and space. Ethnographers create investigative places they call fields, and we look at some favourite constructions. The key point of this chapter is that fields are more than physical settings; they are interrogative frames that are shaped by the ethnographer. Ethnographers can't take a field setting for granted but have to actively play a part in bringing it to life by asking questions about the relationship of the people to their setting. The theoretical and practical aspects of undertaking ethnographic research in both unfamiliar and familiar settings are then explored, and the growth of multi-sited and rapid research is examined.

The second section of the book (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) deals with 'Doing Ethnography.' In Chapter 3, 'Talking to people: negotiations, conversations and interviews', we discuss how talking to people is the pivotal first step in 'doing ethnography'. Ethnographic projects live or die on the ability of ethnographers to negotiate with other people. 'Negotiation', therefore, is a useful theme to explore how ethnographers create and plan their projects and how they navigate the initial, often politically charged, process of gaining access to a group of people or field site. We will then investigate the concept of 'conversation' to lay out strategies for building rapport and trust with a participant group and to introduce the informal, unstructured ethnographic interview.

In Chapter 4, 'Being with people: participation', I ask the question, why does ethnography value the practice of participant observation so highly? Furthermore, why do ethnographers work so hard to make a strange experience familiar? In answering these questions we will explore the idea of cultural and social immersion, step-in-step-out ethnography,

and what embodied experience means for ethnographic claims to knowledge. Chapter 4 argues that an approach I call 'close but not too close' best represents the sort of relationships ethnographers should seek in their fieldwork. That is to say ethnographers should value an insider's perspective, but without giving up on the all-important critical outsider's perspective on their field relationships. This chapter will also highlight the ethical dimensions of the relationships that typically exist between ethnographers and their study group members by looking at participant rights, safety and the ethnographer's obligations to their respective disciplinary codes of practice.

In Chapter 5, 'Looking at people: observations and images', we turn to questions like, how do ethnographers 'look' at people? What do they 'see' and not 'see'? In this chapter we have the opportunity to examine the 'ethnographic gaze', and discuss how it is ethnographers turn the everyday act of 'looking' into systematic observation. This chapter provides some guidelines and tips for seeing the physical structures and human behaviours that are relevant to ethnographic investigation. Beyond the observational aspects of the field, Chapter 5 also examines the use of visual media, arguing that photographs and film are an important aspect of past and contemporary ethnographic methodology. Visual material is something more than a simple adjunct to an ethnographic text; it is a vital element in ethnographic representation.

The third section of the book (Chapters 6, 7 and 8) focuses on the act of 'Inscription'. In Chapter 6, 'Description: writing "down" fieldnotes', we examine the rich, information-packed notes that form the basis of any successful ethnographic project, and look at how they can become a resource to be mined over many years of subsequent research. But how does an ethnographer find time to record data in the hurly-burly of participation? What strategies do ethnographers use to sort out what it is they should and should not be writing down? Chapter 6 explores standard note-taking techniques such as jottings, journals and diary entries. It also examines the role of sketching, mapping and image capture as aspects of note-taking. We will discuss some of the formal do's and don'ts of note-taking (with respect to reactivity, confidentiality, security of data and ethics) and outline ways in which the coding and analysis of ethnographic fieldnotes can begin in these early data-gathering stages. Finally, Chapter 6 offers some advice on the particular issues of note-taking as they relate to applied ethnographic settings and suggests that good ethnographers need to be able to adjust their note-taking strategies to suit particular contexts.

In Chapter 7, 'Analysis to interpretation writing "out" data', we turn to the issue of what to do with all this data once we have gathered it. Here we

look at the important role organising primary and secondary data plays in analysis and interpretation. It is typically stated that data are 'crunched' or in some sense reduced and compressed to form a frame on which to hang ethnographic interpretations and conclusions. To my mind, this metaphor of reduction misreads what we do with data. While data analysis and interpretation may in some sense reduce the quantity of the data, it should also 'value add' to the emerging story. This is what I mean when I say we write 'out' data. This writing out involves thematically coding and indexing to make sense of the piles of notes, sketches, maps and pictures that have been gathered. We discuss how ethnographers articulate their primary data with existing secondary ethnographic, archival and historical data of relevance to their study group or site. Chapter 7 suggests that ethnographic analysis is not so much a matter of sifting through data to find the meaning already in it, but one of actively making meaning from our data. It is argued that making meaning from data needs to be understood with the same sensitivity towards reflexivity and positionality that we ascribe to field experience and interpretation. By doing this ethnographers can move surely through the stages of organising, analysing and then interpreting their data.

By Chapter 8, 'Interpretation to story: writing "up" ethnography' we are examining the issue of producing a good ethnography. Anthropology's engagement with literary theory from the 1980s onward has created increased interest in text, tropes, poetics and persuasion in social science writing. How do ethnographers write 'up' in order to remain true to the ethnographic reality they seek to convey, while nevertheless making the ethnography a 'good read'? In Chapter 8 I will suggest that good writing is arguably the most important aspect of ethnographic interpretation. By looking at the conventions that have characterised ethnographic writing in the past and by engaging with the more recent literary turn, this chapter argues that an approach I call a 'storied reality' captures the best of the objective and subjective elements of ethnographic writing. Chapter 8 also examines structure in ethnographic stories, and looks at the question of style in ethnographic writing.

Finally, in the fourth section, 'Expanding Ethnography', we will recap our portrait of ethnography so far before looking to the future. Chapter 9, 'Conclusion: ethnographic horizons,' finishes the text by exploring the realm of cyber-ethnography and human /animal sociality. We look at these issues in order to discuss the future of ethnography in a world that is creating new forms of sociality. By positioning cyber-ethnography as a challenge to the 'face-to-face, natural setting' approach characteristic of ethnography over the past century an opportunity is created to critically analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches outlined so far. As technology

continues apace to mediate ever-more intimately today's socialisation patterns, as we literally hook ourselves up to more and more 'machines', how can ethnography deal with disembodied socialisation? Following this we will spend some time on the idea of ethnography as applied to the human animal/non-human animal relationship (anthrozoology) and discuss how the new kinship between humans and their animal companions can be understood in ethnographic terms. As such, in Chapter 9 we will critically re-evaluate and conclude on the strengths and weaknesses of an ethnographic approach. I will finish by arguing that a critical yet welcoming approach to cyber-ethnography and ethnography beyond the human should be an integral aspect of our contemporary ethnographic toolkit.

This book structure therefore contains the typical pedagogical elements you would expect in a textbook about the theory and practice of ethnography, but it is presented as a series of characterisations as opposed to a recipe with set rules. The infinite variability of the human subject and the fact ethnographers, with their passions, intellectual interests, biases and ideologies, are themselves part of this infinitely variable human condition means that every project is different and that every ethnographer will bring something different to his or her projects. This suggests to me that, basic concepts aside, learning about ethnography from a book is not really a process of assimilating definitions and rules. Rather, this process should be a long and critical conversation around, about and towards the object of our understanding, in the knowledge that we will never reach a final and definitive level of comprehension. More usefully, once basic practical matters are grasped, we should strive for a relational understanding of who we are as ethnographers, and how this relates to the ethnography of others. All of this preparation, of course, is designed to encourage and guide budding ethnographers as they take on ethnographic projects of their own, be it class exercises, postgraduate research or applied work.

With this in mind I will be accompanying the reader through this text as a narrator. As we move through the various stages in ethnographic practice I have outlined, I will recall the successes and failures I experienced at these points. It's just as important for budding ethnographers to get a sense of what can go wrong as it is to understand what might work. Therefore this book presents itself as more than a textbook (although it is indeed that) but also as a critical conversation on being ethnographic based on the original research experiences of the author and how these compare with the broad canon of ethnographies and ethnographic textbooks dedicated to theory and methods; this book is part practice manual and part critical reflection on practice. I hope you enjoy the journey.