



Figure 0.1 Bellino – Celle village. Photograph by the author.

Introduction

This book is based on fieldwork which took place many years ago. Its focus is Bellino – *Blins* in the local dialect – set at the top of the Vale Varaita in the Italian Alps above Cuneo. Bellino is a localised political unit, called a *comune* in Italian. My account¹ covers a specific period in its long history. Some features of it are common across the Alps, but each *comune* has its unique character – or is assigned that character by the interests and emphases of the person writing the story.² Hence this account of Bellino reflects my own history and is coloured by other things happening in my life at the time.

There are two essential stages in the ethnographic process. First, in the field, we ‘write down’ what we have seen and heard and felt in some form of journal. Since this usually happens at the end of a long day we are in effect ‘writing down’ what we remember of the day’s events. Second, usually back at base, we ‘write up’ those journal notes to challenge or to fit the framework of a particular theory or research question. This is the harder part; it involves comparing and combining our findings with other people’s ‘written up’ accounts.

Most often it is only the second stage exercise which is published; field notes may be archived and made available to selected future researchers, but they are seldom put on public view.³ Here, however, because my aim is to unpack the layers that make up ethnography I have included first stage field notes in this published account, neat, to provide background and context for the (second stage) analysis.

I use two devices to help the separate layers of ethnography leak into each other. One is that, wherever possible, the data are reported as they were given to me by individual informants; the reality of – say – cows is different for each of them and more faithfully represented by their separate ‘cow stories’ (Non-English terms and colloquial phrases which appear in the text are translated in the Glossary at the back of the book.) The other device is more telling: the journal excerpts are selected from voluminous notebooks because they make most explicit reference to the presence and ethnographic significance of

my four children, in the field with me throughout. They are crucial to the account since they gave me extra access to the practicalities of living and the nuances of affect in Bellino, and without them the significance of my gender would have been quite different:⁴ I would have been just another academic tourist from the lowlands, lacking crucial connective social tissue and quite without *serietà* – i.e. without the gravity demanded of a ‘proper’ woman.

The connectedness of the two layers is underlined by pairing the ‘written up’ and ‘not-written-up’ parts in alternating sequence. Each segment of field notes relates to events or themes of the ‘written up’ chapter preceding it – thus, for example, the chapter called ‘Boundaries’ is followed by journal entries which relate, at least implicitly, to ‘inclusions and exclusions’; notes following the biographical case studies of Marie, Margherita, Caterina and Martin (Chapters 11-14) are the fieldworker’s not-written-up back story, describing occasions of my own and my children’s interaction with each of their households.

The *Blins* study is the only one of many field projects in which my ‘family of procreation’ played a central and continuous part. It is also the only one to have languished unpublished for so long, even though the experience of it has stayed warm on the back burner of my mind over all the years: not only warm because glowing, but also warm like a splinter under the skin. When finally I came to writing it ‘up’, the ambiguity



Figure 0.2 Our family complete. Photograph by the author.

of the personal subtext stood out. At the same time the uniqueness of it had faded. On the evidence of solo fieldwork since, I see that the extra ambiguity of the Bellino experience was only that, *extra*. There is always a degree of it: the contradiction implied in the very notion of participant observation makes that plain. But looking back I remember that my awareness of ambiguity has varied with my closeness to the people under study – at its greatest when the research played out in multiplex relationships across the anthropologist-informant divide. As the context of ethnographic encounter grew deeper and more layered, so the ambiguity index mounted. In Bellino the family presence made the line between professional and personal identities extra fuzzy⁵ and its ambiguities extra sharp. How firm can the personal-professional boundary be when children insist on negotiating it? How uniplex are my relationships with women who feed and protect my children as they would their own? What context, whose context are we in when I react to my children spitting at each other? Or when the eldest is mocked at school for lack of Italian and someone's father comes to weep with us when he hears about it?

It all happened a long time ago. Now all the contexts are different. The children have become adults, some have children of their own. I am older, inevitably. Less obviously, so is social anthropology: its emphasis and assumptions now are not what they were then, and the anthropological writer – the writer as anthropologist⁶ – has more right, as well as more obligation, to spell out the ambiguities of the research enterprise.

I do not for a moment claim that the presence/absence of family in the field is the difference that makes most difference to ethnography. I know that in Bellino the discomfiture of all of us was eased by the fact of my being ordinarily preoccupied with family livelihood, but I also know that no magical insight comes with mothering or the practice of housework in difficult conditions.

I made three trips to Bellino between 1971 and 1974. They lasted ten weeks, six months and six weeks respectively, and were followed by a short visit twenty-five years later. It is important that the experience described and the detail reported pertain to that past. The present tense, where it occurs in the text, is an ethnographic present, although it is largely the actual present which colours my interpretation. This, I will argue, is part of the point.

The first trip was to collaborate in a multi-disciplinary study of adaptation to Alpine conditions.⁷ My brief was to analyse the sociology of the marriage system. Biological anthropologists had proposed that the frequency of isonymy – i.e. of spouses with the same pre-marriage

surname – was evidence of close kin endogamy and (so) of a genetically unsound mating strategy.⁸ Some among them felt this ‘explained’ the *comune’s* ‘inability’ to take up modern life. At the time this hypothesis was not unfashionable in biological and demographic discourse (scientists then spoke more glibly of the ‘backwardness’ of rural/isolated/alien peoples than they do today) and I was glad of the chance to challenge it.

The key turned out to be a second series of family names which, being unofficial and formally invisible, had been left out of account by the biologists. Analysis of this *soprannóme* system showed it to be a prior indicator of blood ties and, importantly, the normal basis on which assessments of marriageability in the community were made. Every Bellinese has one;⁹ marriage of people with the same *soprannóme* is avoided and extremely rare. It was soon clear that the frequency of isonymy occurred only in the official naming system and the inbreeding conclusion did not hold.

On the second and third trips, I took these issues further and wider, beyond the biologists’ programme, looking for other ways to explain the curious resilience of Bellino in conditions which, even then, were rare in Europe. The question resonated with work I had previously done on ‘non-development’ in Lesotho, Southern Africa (*‘How come a region, country or, as in this case, a particular Alpine comune, resists the pressures of modernisation?’*);¹⁰ and with social boundary theory – then new, but still now useful to think with¹¹ (*‘What logic sustains the boundary between “us” and “them”?’ ‘What accounts for boundary shift?’*). My hunch was that the unusual closed-ness and apparent backwardness of Bellino might better be explained along these lines. I have pursued that hunch in Chapter 3, detailing the *soprannóme* system as an element in Bellino’s curious boundary structure. Here its significance is in underlining the distance between the local community and the nation state – between official and unofficial norms.

During the first visit of 1971 I went alone with the four children, then aged between two and six. Their father, ‘W’ in the text, stayed in Toronto to finish other work. Of that trip he remembers only four small backs retreating into an aeroplane, each with a stitched-on label to show name, flight numbers and destination address, ‘just in case’. In 1973 and again in 1974 he came with us, officially as a research entomologist. In decades of a dual career marriage, these trips are the only ones in which we achieved research projects in the same place at the same time. The effect was profound: his presence raised the family morale, its physical wellbeing and its status in the community at a stroke. As the children felt it and the Bellinesi saw it, we were now a proper family.

We never, of course, functioned as local families do, particularly in relation to the environment. The second trip was planned to extend into and through the winter of 1973/4, but it was not possible for us to organise living conditions essential to the survival of young children in the Alpine winter. We lacked the cows necessary to sustain heat in the house we lived in and could not reasonably expect to acquire them. Without cows of our own we could only survive as lodgers, and there was no local family with scope to absorb a surplus of six, however eager they were to take us in.

So we retreated to a softer and warmer season in a solid Dutch house outside Utrecht, the six of us pursuing our various academic projects in relatively great luxury. The thrill of crisp sheets and shiny floors carried the children through the challenge of yet another foreign language. When spring came we went back up to *Blins* for a third period, shorter but more intense than the first two. I have often regretted that the exigencies of livelihood made it impossible for us to overwinter in *Blins*, but there is some profit in having been forced to learn what those exigencies are.

Underlying it all is the difficulty of distinction between 'age effect' (I think differently because I am older) and 'cohort effect' (women who are now the age I was then construct their lives differently because the world has changed). The reader may be better placed than I am to see



Figure 0.3 'The arrival of four children'. Photograph by the author.

which effect is in play when. However, one development, probably involving both, needs to be noted. When I originally came up with the title *Sometime Kin*, I was thinking of the centuries of recorded genealogy of *Blins* and of its two naming systems; of the fluidity of kin ties and obligations everywhere;¹² and of the up and down migrations of Bellinesi to Turin and Perpignan. One generation on, its meaning for me has expanded. Now the 'sometime kinship' of the title refers also to the shifting roles and attachments of the family which I continue to call my own, and which I am glad to be able to acknowledge with this book.



First Contact

As the Bellinesi saw it, the most significant feature of the first research season was the sudden arrival of four children. People told each other how beautiful they were. They might be from the south, except that they speak only English. They run about a lot. '*Con fòrza*'. The person with them is less interesting; apparently the mother, but not so dark and speaks Italian. There is no father. Perhaps it is an *asilo* come up for the air? The priest learns that there is a father and that he is working away. Also that the children are not Catholic, poor creatures. The nuns are encouraged to enfold them and they convey the non-verbal externals very easily. The children learn that when they genuflect the nuns will smile and give them sweets. For the priest himself their mother's education and her status with the Torino *professori* are more promising. He wants to establish a common ground for conversation but finds the lack of religion to be in the way... Not even a Protestant? Only half a Jew? ... The problem is solved after a week or so when he learns that the children, all of whom are of mixed race and some of whom are foundlings, can be taken as evidence of a natural Christian spirit. He is sure that no one with such a commitment to children can be godless or frivolous.

From this point, interaction with both men and women is easier, but it is still careful. There are few jokes, no banter, certainly no sexual allusions of any kind. Anyway ordinary interaction is impeded by hay-making on one side, domestic chores and food getting on the other. Publicly, everyone is in a hurry. The longest conversations are with other women in the wash house, shouted across the muddy clothes and the noise of the cold water that flows straight from the river and cannot be turned off. The weather is miserable. Once, that summer, it rained twelve days in a row. The clothes never dry and the beds are damp and sour. The children are either whining in our one-room house or lost. When they are found again they say they

have been visiting because the hay is wet and no one can work until it dries. There are no other children around: they are all 'up' with the cows and the grandparents so people smile at mine and give them sweets or bread and butter. ['How else can they be made welcome, Signora? They do not understand what we say!'] When they are fetched from other people's kitchens or escorted back to their own the adults thank each other warmly enough, but we never stay long in each other's houses and rarely sit down to eat together. Each of us is pre-occupied with a separate livelihood.

So much for the first season. Two years later, the most significant feature seems to be that it is the second season. ['In spite of the difficulties you have brought the children back to us. Brava!'] It is also important that this time their father too has come. He is made welcome because he is connected to them: even his unfamiliar race is explained by the way the children look. His peculiar interest in insects is not, however. It is made acceptable only by the priest's assurance that he too is of the *professori* and very educated. It is his profession to write about insects, that is why he must watch the flies where they breed, in the cow dung heaped by the side of the highway so that the lowland farmers who buy it for fertiliser can load it directly on to their trucks.

The house of before is not available, having been twice flooded since we were there. Anyway this time it is March, snow is still hard on the ground, and no building which has not been lived in during the winter is habitable. We live for a month in a tourist apartment at the bottom of Bellino valley, in Casteldelfino, commuting up the long hill every day in a car hired in Turin for the purpose. There are a lot of empty houses in Celle, but no one seriously considers renting us one until someone in the lower parish, observing the fancy car and the tourist apartment, advertises a tiny two-room unit at an outrageously high monthly rent. The upper parish centring on Celle then claims us for its own. One of its residents is persuaded to offer the long-empty house which he and his brother inherited from their maternal aunt, and the rest, contrary to their usual practice, do nothing to block his decision to let in long-term outsiders on the basis of an annual rent little higher than his kin would pay to store furniture or hay in the building.

We install a large oil-burning stove of the sort that only lowlanders are said to use and run it for a week before moving in. The house gets warm but the bread tastes of kerosene. Our landlord says that kind of heat is unhealthy. Like every other house in *Blins*, this one has two rooms - *la camera* and *la cucina*. Unlike some it has not been modernised at all. *Non è aggiustata*. The floor of one room is rough hardwood, the floor of the other is like the street. Both are sunless. The two sets of windows face in different directions, east and west, but both are less than three metres away from the grey

stone wall of the building opposite. The roofs jut out over the street blocking the light as well as the weather.

Those of the children who are old enough attend school and begin to smell of wood smoke and chocolate like their classmates. Still it is easier for them to make enemies than friends, and they learn their local idioms of conflict – stones and spit – before the local idioms of speech. The other children call them stupid for knowing none of *Blins'* languages. When the eldest can bear that label no longer and demands a turn to read aloud in class as ordinary children do, they scream with laughter from the second sentence. The mockery makes a good story, and the local children take it home to their parents. Everybody reacts. Some shrug and make comments about the behaviour of the young: with these we are now united under the cross of parenthood. The father of one family is moved to tears because he can remember when he was made to go away to Yugoslavia in wartime and could understand nothing, and because the child tried so hard. He comes to say so, supporting us as though we had been bereaved, a close friend. If until this point time has been suspended, now it is enhanced: it is as though the sharing of this family crisis has the same force as many years of shared experience.

This second season is longer, extending in both directions beyond the summer. It is physically no less hard than the first, but better organised, socially warmer. We interact with a few married couples as such, able even to exchange jokes about the married state without embarrassing any of us, and in family groups in which all the children present are dealt with collectively, like siblings. By the time summer comes we are allowed by some to work in the fields as their friends – something which they say educated *cittadini*, *professori* – urbanites and professors – cannot and may not do...



Notes

1. Parts of this text and of the Epilogue are drawn directly from Wallman, 'Boundaries of Memory and Anthropology'.
2. Most inspiring among many accounts are John Berger's *Pig Earth*, which documents peasant life in France; and Marco Aime's *Il lato selvatico del tempo* [*The Wild Side of Time*], based in a Bellino-like settlement in Val Grana, the valley parallel to Varaita.
3. Among iconic exceptions, consider Malinowski's *Diaries*, but note that these were published after his death and without his permission.

4. This is a useful demonstration of the fact that the effect of being a woman in the field varies with other-than-gender elements of research context. See Wallman, 'Epistemologies of Sex'.
5. Kosko, *Fuzzy Thinking*.
6. As in Wulff, *The Anthropologist as Writer*.
7. The programme was convened by Brunetto Chiarelli of the Istituto di Antropologia, Università di Torino. I am grateful for the opportunity provided by our collaboration, and to the Canada Council for financial support.
8. Lasker et al., 'Degrees of Human Genetic Isolation'.
9. Wallman, 'Preliminary notes on *soprannóme* in a part of Piedmont'.
10. Wallman, *Take Out Hunger*; and Wallman, 'Conditions of non-Development'.
11. Wallman, 'The Boundaries of "Race"'
12. See further Wallman, 'Kinship, a-Kinship, anti-Kinship'.