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Preface

Off-grid isn’t a state of mind. It isn’t about someone being out of touch, about a place that is hard to get to, or about a weekend spent offline. Off-grid is the property of a building (generally a home but sometimes even a whole town) that is disconnected from the electricity and the natural gas grid. Off-grid buildings are therefore self-sufficient for light, power, and heat. But as it goes, people who live in off-grid homes also tend to be independent for procuring other vital resources, such as water and food. To live off-grid, therefore, means having to radically re-invent domestic life as we know it, and this is what this book is about: individuals and families who have chosen to live in that dramatically innovative, but also quite old, way of life. We call them “off-gridders.”

Off-gridders’ homes are, in many cases, experimental labs for our collective future. The lessons they are learning today about living with renewable energy are the lessons we will all need to learn tomorrow in order to make our lives more sustainable, more respectful toward the environment, and less dependent on non-renewable resources. This book is an intimate look into unusual contemporary domestic lives, but it is also a call to the rest of us leading ordinary lives to examine what we take for granted about our homes, our needs, and our wants. We believe that this book will be valuable in courses on the environment and renewable resources as well as ethnography. We also hope that our work will appeal well beyond the academy.

From 2011 to 2013 Jonathan Taggart and I spent two years travelling across Canada to find off-gridders and visit off-gridders’ homes. Sometimes we were able to stay with them for a short period of time. Sometimes we were allowed to take photographs and record video and audio. And sometimes we even had the chance to practice off-grid living ourselves through short stays at off-grid cabins and homes. Altogether we visited about 100 homes and interviewed about 200 off-grid Canadians, as well as many American and British expats living in Canada. In sum we were able to find off-gridders in every single province of territory of what happens to be the second largest country on earth. This book is our story of our travels, and
ultimately our narration of their experiences, their challenges, their solutions, their aspirations, their ways of life, and their own stories.

To make our work possible Jon and I had to fly on dozens of planes, ride snowmobiles, paddle kayaks and canoes, don snow-shoes, ride ATVs, sail ferries and small boats, drive on ice roads and city streets, and bike and trek across many regions of our country. To render the intensity of that kind of experience we wrote this book in the style of a travelogue. But these aren’t really the pages of a travel essay; ours is first and foremost a work of ethnography. Interviews, observation, and participation into the day-to-day life of off-gridders have inspired us to reflect, interpret, and contextualize off-grid living in itself, but also (and perhaps more importantly) to question our collective, modern, on-grid way of life. Ideally, after reading this book anyone should understand much more deeply what we all usually take for granted about our modern condition in relation to comfort, convenience, and connectivity.

There is a certain irony about our fieldwork. As Jon and I zigzagged from province to province to understand the meanings of simplicity, of a more basic and Spartan life, and of an alternative way of living with modern technology, we punctually lugged with us satchel bags and panniers full of the latest visual and digital gadgets. Thanks to the material we collected, what we ended up producing in the year following our travels is a hybrid book that combines the written word together with sound clips, photography, and video. In keeping with the purpose of the Routledge Innovative Ethnography Series we offer our reader/viewer/listener our multiple creations, hoping that these will somehow reverberate and strike their imagination in meaningful ways. The website accompanying this book—hyperlinked and referenced throughout this book—will hopefully serve as a great source of information for everyone interested in sensuous, multimodal learning and a new way of doing research and of knowing.

Our writing criss-crosses issues related to technology, sense of place, lifestyle, energy, sustainability, and everyday life. These are topics that cross the disciplinary boundaries of geography, cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology. They are subjects of interest to those keen on teaching and learning about material culture, skill, slow living, and much more. We also hope that our book will stimulate the sociological and geographic imagination of students enrolled in introductory courses and in qualitative
research methods, especially ethnography, as well as courses on sustainability and the environment. Though each chapter focuses on a key concept and a particular topic, both the book and the website are organized by province/territory. There are ten provinces and three territories in Canada, and therefore there are thirteen chapters to this book and thirteen main pages on the book’s website. Each of the chapters narrates our travels, describes our encounters with off-gridders, and reflects and analyzes the significance of various aspects of their practices and experiences. All the photos are shared to evoke a sense of what we witnessed, not as objective documentation. We chose photos that we liked: pictures that Jonathan took to animate our recollections and enliven your vicarious experience. The videos were produced with the same purpose of the photography and the writing: to tell a story, to allow viewers to “meet” characters and see their homes, as well as to listen to their narratives. Each medium seems to “speak” differently, and we hope you will enjoy the cacophony.