This book offers a path through a forest. The many and varied relationships between culture and health are what populate this metaphorical forest. At different times of day the light will play tricks on you with shadows pointing you to travel in one direction or another. These can be likened to the truly multidisciplinary perspectives that are relevant to an understanding of culture and health. While I have tried to be aware of these, the path travelled in this book doubtless reflects my own training in clinical psychology and my subsequent experiences of working in different cultures. As with any path it cannot take in all that it passes by and so my description of culture and health is one which makes personal sense.

The terrain covered in this book is not comprehensive; it is highly selective. I do not want you, the reader, to travel this path and believe that you have seen through the forest, but to retrace some of my steps and follow different shadows and kinks of light.

This book is written at a time of explosive activity in research and writing about both culture and health, and an increasing realisation of the importance of their tantalising interplays. I have omitted to tackle some topics which are undoubtedly important – emotion, interpersonal relationships, attitudes toward ageing and psychometric assessment, to mention but a few. Some of these issues are dealt with by other books in this series, while others would not squeeze into the confines of space allotted me. Some of the ideas included are, however, ‘new’ and doubtless somewhat raw. These include the Problem Portrait Technique, the Faith Grid, the use of Critical Incidents as a form of therapy and the suggestion of health change progressing through Incremental Improvement. They are served up to be chewed over and, if need be, spat out! They are things which I picked up and put into my pocket as I picked out a pathway.

It has been difficult to know how to refer to cultural groupings. One of these is the idea of ‘Western’ cultures. Of course there is no such thing as ‘the West’. What is west of you all depends on where you’re standing. It can be the height of ethnocentricity to talk of the Middle East or indeed the Far East. If I say I live in the ‘Far East’, you may well ask where it is that I am far from and east of! Yet such misnomers can be widely understood summaries of an abstract concept. In this book I have opted to use the term ‘West’ to refer to a range of cultures which have some important characteristics in common. These
countries include the United States of America, much of Europe, Australia, New Zealand and to a lesser extent some countries which have been strongly influenced by the values held by people from these ‘Western’ cultures. To remind us that there is no such place as ‘the West’ I have used the term with inverted commas.

During the writing of this book I have had the great good fortune to travel five continents, work in three different universities and live in four ‘homes’. The influences on me have literally been too numerous to mention. The thoughts of many people have beat out my path and pulled back the undergrowth, so infusing me with the excitement and bewilderment which is born of true exploration. However, to move forward you must have some way of knowing where you have been. My editor, Daphne Keats, and publishers Comfort Jegede and Michael Combs at Wiley, have awoken me from slumber when I have dosed off in some cosy corner of a Malawian mountain or Irish hay field. Without the support and thoughtful commentaries of my wife, Eilish McAuliffe, and mother, Pat MacLachlan, the writing of this book would have been a very solitary pursuit. I am also very grateful to Lisa Cullen for her skill and patience in producing the tables and figures in this book. Finally, a thank you to all those colleagues and friends from different cultures, who over the years have tolerated many strange questions. Some of your answers are in this book.

Malcolm MacLachlan
Preface to the Second Edition

Since the first edition of *Culture and Health*, globalisation has increased apace. The ethos of diversity, whether in terms of multiculturalism, sexuality, gender roles or access for the disabled, is now much more pervasive than before. Confronted with the choice between a cultural mosaic and a cultural ‘melting pot’, the mosaic seems more resilient and more preferable. However, the term ‘multiculturalism’ stresses the need for an increasing array of distinct identities rather than being subsumed under a singular idea of ‘diversity’. As is illustrated in this volume, cultural identity serves not just a group’s need for cohesiveness, but also an individual’s need for a coherent, and particular, world view.

In this second edition there are significant new additions and ideas. At a conceptual level, I have tried to think through the interrelationships of medical anthropology, medical sociology and health psychology, and acknowledge something that was implicit in the first edition – that, whatever the cultural or contextual parameters, people have the right to their own health psychology – to make what sense they can of the relationship between what they think, how they act and their well-being. I have also, however, tried to acknowledge my sympathy with a critical perspective, one that is concerned with broader social issues, less individualistic and less oriented towards biological and reductionist understandings of people’s personal experiences. As such, I believe in a social constructionist perspective that is critical for rather than simply being critical of other perspectives on health.

In this second edition I also seek to emphasise the need for a global health perspective and that such a perspective must inherently recognise that this broad panoramic view is made up of different ‘takes’ from varying cultural positions. Although the idea of health as a human right is compelling, identifying just exactly what that means in different cultures is crucial if it is not to become yet another United Nations’ ‘feel-good’ abstraction with few specifics to guide practitioners.

In the first edition of this book I paid insufficient attention to gender and poverty as ‘cross-cutting’ issues and I have sought to address this in the second edition. I have also tried to indicate how culture can often present ethical issues for which there may be no clear ‘right answer’. All of the chapters have been updated and added to, and I have also added a completely new chapter on global health, because this movement is highly relevant...
and sympathetic to cultural perspectives on health. While in the first edition I used inverted commas and a capital first letter to describe the idea of, for example, the ‘West’, I have dropped these and now simply refer to the west, as is now the trend. Perhaps it is an alternative way of acknowledging that while such an idea exists, the place does not. My publishers have been extraordinarily patient in their waiting for this second edition and I am most grateful for the time that they have allowed me. Finally, my children, Anna, Tess and Lara (all new additions since the first edition), and my wife, Eilish, have been my travel companions across each continent and furnished me with perspectives that I was quite foreign to. And this is the essence and value of understanding how cultures influence our lives, our health and our experience of illness.

Malcolm MacLachlan