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Western Diseases

As a group, western diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, breast cancer, allergies and mental health problems constitute one of the major problems facing humans at the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly as they extend into the poorer countries of the world. An evolutionary perspective has much to offer standard biomedical understanding of western diseases. At the heart of this approach is the notion that human evolution occurred in circumstances very different from the modern affluent western environment and that, as a consequence, human biology is not adapted to the contemporary western environment. Pollard provides a novel synthesis of this evolutionary perspective in a book aimed at advanced students and academics in the fields of medicine, human population biology and medical anthropology.

TESSA POLLARD graduated from the University of Oxford with degrees in Human Sciences and Biological Anthropology. She is currently a lecturer in Medical Anthropology at Durham University. She conducts research on risk factors for cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes in western and westernising populations.

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Western Diseases

An evolutionary perspective

Tessa M. Pollard
Durham University

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Dedicated to
Geoffrey Ainsworth Harrison

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Preface

The inspiration for this book originates with Professor Geoffrey Ainsworth Harrison of the University of Oxford, who taught me and many others the value of the evolutionary approach to human biology. The third edition of the textbook he wrote with Paul Baker and others (Harrison *et al*. 1988) was a defining part of the curriculum at Oxford and I draw strongly on the approach of that volume in this book. He also introduced us to literature on western diseases published in the 1970s and 1980s by Boyden, and by Trowell and Burkitt, described at the beginning of Chapter 1. His supervision of my postgraduate work provided invaluable further opportunity to learn from his methods and ideas. In my subsequent career I have benefited greatly from this solid and stimulating foundation.

In my own teaching of advanced undergraduates and graduate students at Durham University I have felt the lack of an up-to-date equivalent of these texts, a feeling that was the main motivation for me to write this book. In the intervening years I have also benefited from exposure to epidemiological research on cardiovascular disease and other western diseases, and I hope that the end result profits from my learning beyond anthropology. My aim has been to draw these two approaches together to create a new synthesis. I am aware, of course, that in aiming for such a synthesis I have failed to provide the level of evolutionary theory that some evolutionary biologists and biological anthropologists would wish to see, while offering less detail of biomedical and epidemiological research than might be expected from the other side.

Many people provided practical and other kinds of support during the writing process and I would like to thank them. Alejandra Núñez-de la Mora commented on drafts of several chapters and I am particularly grateful for her time and effort. Thanks also to others who gave me valuable feedback and assistance. They are Gillian Bentley, Nigel Unwin, Ernie Pollard, Malcolm Smith, Grażyna Jasieńska, Malia Fullerton, Helen Ball, Peter Ellison, Judith Manghan, Andrew Russell, Leslie Carlin, Tim Gage, Robert Hegele, Bob Layton, Steve McGarvey, Trudi Buck, Caroline Jones, Peter Collins, Veryan Pollard and Kate Hampshire. I have also benefited greatly from interactions with students at Durham University. My greatest debt is to Malcolm Smith and Rosa Pollard Smith, who provided practical and emotional support, and showed patience and forbearance throughout. I am very grateful to them.

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