PRAISE FOR
ROBERT N. BUTLER, MD

“This is the biography of Robert N. Butler we’ve been waiting for. For those who were privileged to know him, this book brings him vividly to life. For those who recognize his influence, it will illuminate his legacy. For all who expect to grow old, it will bring a lasting message of hope.”

—JACK KERWIN, PRINCIPAL, ROBERT N. BUTLER CENTER AND DIRECTOR OF THE NEW YORK UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE ON AGING, BARNABAS SCHOOL OF NURSING

“This is not only a personal biography of an iconic figure in the field of aging but also a biography of the discipline of gerontology. The stories fill in the blanks for us and help make sense of our own professional lives as we see more fully the role Butler played in the development of the field. Dr. Butler was our hero, and he gave us courage. His story needs to be shared.”

—JEN D’IGHTHALD, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF AGE WAVE

“Considering the normous impact Butler had on gerontology, I am thrilled that Achenbaum has taken on the very fitting and formidable task of depicting and commemorating Butler’s life. Butler’s career was marked by a fundamental optimism toward the aged that brought talent, rigor, and legitimacy to the field of gerontology. I look forward to the insights I am certain will be shared.”

—LEAH ROGNE, MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

“Visionary of Healthy Aging is a biographical masterpiece about a significant contributor to the ideas and social ideals of the twentieth century. Butler forged a global alliance of scientists, medicine, social work, and related fields. He set the nation’s age-based health care agenda and research priorities as the founding director of the National Institute on Aging and by creating the first interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary department of geriatrics at New York City’s Mount Sinai Hospital. In the final two decades of his career, Butler forged a global alliance of scientists, educators, practitioners, politicians, journalists, and advocates through the International Longevity Center.”

“W. Andrew Achenbaum has crafted a biographical masterpiece about a significant contribution to the ideas and social ideals of the twentieth century. Butler forged a global alliance of scientists, medicine, social work, and related fields. He set the nation’s age-based health care agenda and research priorities as the founding director of the National Institute on Aging and by creating the first interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary department of geriatrics at New York City’s Mount Sinai Hospital. In the final two decades of his career, Butler forged a global alliance of scientists, educators, practitioners, politicians, journalists, and advocates through the International Longevity Center.”

W. ANDREW ACHEBAUM

Robert N. Butler was a scholar, psychiatrist, and Pulitzer Prize–winning author who revolutionized the way the world thinks about aging and the elderly. One of the first psychiatrists to engage with older adults and spent a lifetime working to improve their status, medical treatment, and care. Early in his career, Butler seized on the positive features of late-life development—pictures he documented in his pathbreaking research on “healthy aging” at the National Institutes of Health and in private practice. He set the nation’s age-based health care agenda and research priorities as the founding director of the National Institute on Aging and by creating the first interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary department of geriatrics at New York City’s Mount Sinai Hospital. In the final two decades of his career, Butler forged a global alliance of scientists, educators, practitioners, politicians, journalists, and advocates through the International Longevity Center.

A scholar who knew Butler personally and professionally, W. Andrew Achenbaum follows this pioneer’s significant contributions to the concept of healthy aging and the notion that aging is not synonymous with physical and mental decline. Emphasizing the progressive aspects of Butler’s approach and insight, Achenbaum affirms the ongoing relevance of his work to gerontology, geriatrics, medicine, social work, and related fields.


Director of the National Institute on Aging and by creating the first interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary department of geriatrics at New York City’s Mount Sinai Hospital. In the final two decades of his career, Butler forged a global alliance of scientists, educators, practitioners, politicians, journalists, and advocates through the International Longevity Center.
ROBERT N. BUTLER, MD
Visionary of Healthy Aging

W. ANDREW ACHENBAUM

Columbia University Press
New York
To Robert N. Butler’s daughters—Cynthia, Carole, Christine, and Alexandra—and to his grandchildren and great-grandchildren

And in memory of Myrna I. Lewis (1938–2005)
CONTENTS

Preface ix
Acknowledgments xvii

one LIFE REVIEW 1

two THE FORMATIVE YEARS 25

three A PROFESSIONAL APPRENTICE 47

four FORGING WASHINGTON CONNECTIONS 69

five BUTLER AT THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF AGING 91

six EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF GERIATRICS 115
Dr. Robert N. Butler became the “Visionary of Healthy Aging” here and abroad by dint of his five decades of groundbreaking research, influential writing, prudent institution building, and diligent networking. He helped to transform the study of aging from a marginal specialty into an intellectually vibrant field of inquiry. Gerontology now attracts the attention of renowned scholars, emerging professionals, students, and other experts who are determined to understand the secrets of longevity and healthy aging. Butler designed, underwrote, and conveyed perspectives on aging rigorous enough to impress scientific peers and practical enough to sway policy makers and politicians. A psychiatrist and geriatrician, Butler also initiated changes in the training of physicians and other health professionals on how to care for the elderly. All this had a profound impact on altering the lay public’s images of the aged: Butler gave people reason to question stereotypes that demeaned late life and cause to focus on healthy, productive aging.

With Butler’s death a formative chapter in the history of gerontology and geriatrics ended: we are unlikely to see in our lifetimes anyone so