This book seeks to take a first step in filling a hole in the current literature on the history of American environmentalism since World War II. The biologist Barry Commoner is frequently invoked in works of environmental history, but little of substance has firmly situated his larger role in that history. During the 1970s, Commoner became famous for his Four Laws of Ecology, and many will recall his presidential campaign of 1980, but rarely is the context of Commoner’s place in the history of American environmentalism properly appreciated. His influence on postwar science, environmentalism, and politics runs much deeper and is far more complicated than the literature suggests. This book means to engage with Commoner’s social and environmental activism. In addition to being one of the most important environmental leaders of the postwar period, Commoner was a very able biologist who did groundbreaking work on the tobacco mosaic virus, free radicals, and genetic theory. While Barry Commoner and the Science of Survival concentrates on Commoner’s use of science as a political tool, it does less justice to his scientific career outside the public arena; that important story remains to be written.

History, though, is an exercise in collaboration. We organize our thoughts and research in tandem with the intellectual generosity of others. In this way, I am indebted to more people than I could ever hope to acknowledge here. I must begin, however, with the protagonist of this story. In my first meeting with Professor Commoner, I asked a series of general and awkward questions that he very patiently answered. At the end of that meeting, he gave me a tour of the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems, then stopped me and said: “You’re Michael; I’m Barry.” I took it as a sign of acceptance. He also duly informed me—without a shred of self-consciousness—that I was tackling an excellent and important topic. He
was right. I hope that the following pages do justice to his career in the public spotlight, the trust he placed in me, and the amount of time he made available for me.

*Barry Commoner and the Science of Survival* began as a doctoral dissertation at Washington State University, where I found myself deeply interested in the relationships between science, environmentalism, and social justice. In a seminar, LeRoy Ashby encouraged me to pursue these questions in a research paper that turned out to be the substance of chapter 4. My instinct is that I have broken—at some point—every one of his “rules” for writing in this book—but, I hope, not the spirit with which they were delivered. The dissertation benefited from the careful and thoughtful comments provided by Ron Doel and Paul Hirt. I especially want to acknowledge Ron’s kindness and encouragement; while tirelessly offering comment and answering questions, he never wavered in his enthusiasm for the questions I was asking. He and Paul are my friends. Paul’s supervision of my graduate work and dissertation struck an excellent balance between teacher and one who strongly believed in my intellectual freedom and that I should chart my own path. He has seen more drafts of these chapters than he or I would likely care to count, and if his good direction is reflected in the pages that follow, then this book is a much better piece of work than I ever deserved to write.

This study has also benefited from the attention and care that Bob Brulle, Ben Cohen, Jeff Crane, Amy Crumpton, Andrew Duffin, John Hausdoerffer, Maril Hazlett, Linda Lear, Neil Maher, Kevin Marsh, and Laurie Mercier offered in insightful readings of various sections and chapters. In addition, for suggestions, conversations, and directions, I am grateful to Kevin Armitage, Sue Armitage, Mary Braun, Laurie Carlson, Arthur Daemmrich, Matthew Eisler, Hilary Elmendorf, Sara Ewert, Michael Fellman, Dale Goble, Hugh Gorman, Denis Hayes, Sam Hays, Katie Johnson, Steve Kale, Peter Kuznick, Christophe Lécuyer, Jack Little, Alan Loeb, Tim Luke, Gregg Mitman, Cyrus Mody, Tammy Nemeth, Sheldon Novick, Bill Robbins, Philip Scranton, Thomas Seiler, Steve Shay, Adam Sowards, Jeffrey Stine, Heather Streets, Noël Sturgeon, Paul Sutter, Jay Taylor, Patricia Thorsten, Jessica Wang, Sylvia Washington, Charlie Weiner, Laurie Whitcomb, and Tony Zaragoza. What light this work does offer is amplified by the generosity of these colleagues and friends. I, of course, remain solely responsible for its enduring shortcomings.
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