I want to make it clear at the outset that this work is not and does not attempt to be the complete story of the lives of William and Helen Milliken. It concentrates on their impact on the public life of Michigan and the reasons for that impact, ranging from the natural and human history of the Traverse City region to their temperaments, upbringing, and self-discovery and self-expression. In an epoch of vicious, personalized politics, it is particularly important to recognize how and why Bill and Helen Milliken articulated a different approach to public life and governance.

It is critical not to idealize the Millikens. Doing so puts them behind glass and could prevent future public servants from believing they can approach public life in a similarly constructive way.

On the other hand, as I came to know the Millikens better in the course of writing this book, I also came to realize that many of their most fervent admirers and longtime associates saw in them the expression of their own finest qualities and ideals. To some extent, this means the Millikens were symbols as well as human beings. That does not diminish their characters or contributions, but it underscores the ways in which their natural civility and love of privacy helped them reflect back the best that many had to offer. In a time when we reflexively suspect the worst of many politicians, it is useful to remember an age in which the Millikens inspired many to believe the best of them.
No one, including the Millikens, can survive the expectation of perfection, and I have tried in the course of this book to pinpoint mistakes of judgment, character flaws, and other blemishes on the public records of two Michigan leaders. But I did not attempt to probe deeply into their private lives except to the extent that events in those lives influenced the public people the Millikens became.

Every author owes thanks to hundreds of helpful friends and sources. In this case, the thanks are especially abundant in light of the subject matter—for Bill and Helen Milliken have accumulated scores of thoughtful and helpful friends through the years—and the process by which the book came to be.

I want to begin by thanking Lana Pollack, president of the Michigan Environmental Council (MEC), for supporting this book from day one. While working tirelessly to make MEC a major-league environmental organization visible on the national landscape, she has also been an effective advocate for clean air and water policies, a skillful and supportive boss, a loyal and loving friend, and an invaluable critic. She keenly grasps the relationship between the story of the Millikens and the character of Michigan that MEC and so many others work to protect.

I also want to honor the memory of my late father, who worked for the former governor for 13 years. He instilled in my siblings and me an appreciation for the joys and sacrifices of public service and an understanding of the unique humaneness of the governor he served.

The Millikens are to be thanked not just for their contributions to the welfare of Michigan but also for cooperating with this project, literally throwing open their doors for the inspection of lives well lived. They were candid, reflective, wry, and willing to risk an independent judgment of their mistakes as well as their achievements in this book. They have not approved and did not attempt to censor a word of it.

Many family members, friends, and former aides responded quickly and repeatedly to requests for information and opinions about the Millikens’ lives. Joyce Braithwaite-Brickley and George Weeks both provided the behind-the-scenes narrative that only two of the former governor’s closest advisers and friends could and screened the manuscript for errors, exaggerations, and misinterpretations. They were unflagging in their patience with my questions and scrupulous in their honesty about the good and bad of the Milliken years. I appreciate the courtesy of William Milliken’s brother and sister, John and Ruth, in meeting
with me to discuss memories of a childhood spent in Traverse City. William Milliken Jr. was also forthcoming in an interview about the blessings and burdens of being a prominent politician’s son.

Other Milliken associates who generously answered every question put to them—and went far beyond in explaining their work—include Charlie Greenleaf, Billie Harrison, Richard Helmbrecht, and James Phelps. Governor Jennifer M. Granholm graciously took time from her punishing schedule to offer thoughts on how the Milliken style and values affect her work. I also want to thank Jack Bails, Dennis Cawthorne, Nancy Dockter, Phyllis Dell, Peter Ellsworth, Don Gordon, Fred Grasman, Gus Harrison, Paul Hillegonds, Christine Hollister, Noble Kheder, Richard McLellan, Keith Molin, Frank Ochberg, Maurice Reizen, Bill Rustem, Craig Ruff, Tim Skubick, and Howard Tanner for taking the time to meet with me and answer numerous questions.

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As years pass, the importance of family ties becomes more apparent to me. My mother, Barbara, brothers Jack and Tom, sister-in-law Suzanne, niece Anna, and nephew Michael are remarkably kind and generous people, and I appreciate them deeply.

Several of the environmental organizations for which I’ve worked
deserve note; they have enabled me to find a home and do meaningful work while exercising remarkable restraint about my frailties and providing generous support for the job of recording environmental and political history. Besides the Michigan Environmental Council, I want to acknowledge Clean Water Action, one of the nation’s oldest and best environmental advocacy organizations with a strong record of mobilizing people to support clean water, and the Ecology Center, a group based in Ann Arbor that has scored enormous environmental health victories even during the hard times of the 1990s and the early twenty-first century. Those who follow us will benefit greatly from the pollution these groups have prevented and the places they have protected for all time.

During the writing of this book, one of Michigan’s most formidable and unforgettable advocates and spirits, Mary Beth Doyle, tragically lost her life. In her absence, many have come to appreciate even more than before her role as a source of inspiration, insight, and strategic thinking and as a conscience for Michigan’s environmental movement. Her work and great love of life continue to send ripples outward. Like many, I miss her. The spirit of public service illustrated by the lives of the Millikens is consistent with Mary Beth’s belief in a more compassionate, humane, and sustainable society. In a small way, this book is a tribute to her.