Advance Praise for A SAVING REMNANT

“This splendid portrait of parallel lives is deeply moving, and galvanizing. Filled with new information, keen insights, and stirring details.” —Blanche Wiesen Cook, author of Eleanor Roosevelt, volumes I, II, and III (forthcoming)

“Duberman has given us an absorbing book—radiant with an embedding and unquenchable humanity.” —David Remnick

“As in his biographies of Paul Robeson and Lincoln Kirstein, Martin Duberman sheds fascinating new light on the history of modern American radicalism.” —Eric Foner, Columbia University

“Once again Martin Duberman single-handedly expands our understanding of American history. Informative, illuminating, sobering, and an essential contribution to our knowledge of American radicalism.” —Harlan Ullman, author of The Tai Thai Affair

“Duberman’s sensitive dual biography of Barbara Deming and David McReynolds traces the major political and social movements of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.” —David Broder, senior lecturer, Dartmouth College

“A stirring history of passionate struggle against oppressive social conditions.” —Lillian Faderman, author of Surpassing the Love of Men and Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers

“A fascinating book full of wonderfully rendered details that tell a story no one has yet told. Essential reading.” —Gwendolyn Sze, associate and author of Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation

“A Saving Remnant is the most recent tour de force by Martin Duberman, America’s most daring and creative living biographer.” —Thomas Patrick McCarthy, Baranaks University

“A Saving Remnant is a thrilling piece of personal and political history. Although the story he recounts is complex, Duberman has made it simple and brilliantly clear.” —Edmund White

In this remarkable dual biography, the prizewinning historian Martin Duberman reveals a vital public sphere of radical activism and a dramatic private one of homosexuality. Barbara Deming and David McReynolds first crossed paths in the 1960s when both emerged as leading figures on the American left. The two agreed on most of the issues of the day, and were especially active in the black struggle and the effort to stop the war in Vietnam. Both also maintained an abiding commitment to the tactics of nonviolent direct action. Yet though they remained friends, Barbara and David strenuously disagreed about feminism, antipornography, and the course of the gay movement, with David expressing reservations about all three. Barbara ultimately ended up living in a lesbian commune and David ran (on the Socialist Party ticket) as the first openly gay candidate for the presidency of the United States.

With an alluring cast of characters that includes intellectuals, artists, and activists from Bayard Rustin, Quentin Crisp, a young Alvin Ailey, and Allen Ginsberg to renowned critic Edmund Wilson and writer Mary McCarthy, A Saving Remnant is a brilliant achievement from one of our most important historians.
A SAVING REMNANT
Also by Martin Duberman

Nonfiction

Waiting to Land
The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein
Queer Representations (editor)
A Queer World (editor)
Stonewall
Cures: A Gay Man’s Odyssey
Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past (co-editor)
Paul Robeson: A Biography
About Time: Exploring the Gay Past
Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community
The Uncompleted Past
James Russell Lowell
The Antislavery Vanguard (editor)
Charles Francis Adams, 1807–1886

Drama

Radical Acts
Male Armor: Selected Plays, 1968–1974
The Memory Bank

Fiction

Haymarket
A SAVING REMNANT

The Radical Lives of Barbara Deming and David McReynolds

Martin Duberman
For Marcia Gallo
loving friend
My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed

I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,

with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

—ADRIENNE RICH, from “Natural Resources”
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Author’s Note

The phrase “a saving remnant” has historically referred to that small number of people neither indoctrinated nor frightened into accepting oppressive social conditions. Unlike the general populace, they openly challenge the reigning powers-that-be and speak out early and passionately against injustice of various kinds. They attempt, with uneven degrees of success, to awaken and mobilize others to join in the struggle for a more benevolent, egalitarian society.

One of my intentions in writing this book is to demonstrate that in the mid-to-late twentieth century in the United States, the “saving remnant” included, in some cases prominently, a number of gay people. I’d initially expected to write about some half dozen of them but ultimately found myself concentrating on only two: Barbara Deming and David McReynolds. Several factors went into that decision. Both were left-wing radicals, not mere liberals, and on most critical issues of their day—including nuclear disarmament, the black civil rights struggle, nonviolence, and the war in Vietnam—they were ardently engaged, calling early on, for example, for the United States’ immediate withdrawal from Vietnam.

On those issues, Deming’s and McReynolds’s views coincided, and they often worked together politically. But regarding several other
issues—in particular feminism and the rise of a gay rights movement—they came to sharply disagree. In this they mirrored the congruence and discord that often existed side by side on the Left in general. On the two matters of feminism and gay rights, Barbara would prove more radical than David—though she never became the lesbian separatist he would accuse her of being. (I realize that referring to my two subjects on a first-name basis—as I do throughout the book—may antagonize some, and I should explain a bit further. I’ve known David, casually, for many years, and though I never met Barbara, she’s come to feel like an intimate friend—making the use of last names seem artificially formal.)

Radicals were not as uncommon in national gay organizations themselves forty years ago as they are today. Currently, the large LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) organizations reflect the outlook of a significant majority of gay people in general, whose politics remain mostly focused on their own issues. This is less true—a lot less true, I feel, when in an optimistic mood—of the younger generation, especially those involved in political work on the local level. But the two issues that are currently at the top of the agenda for most gay people—legalizing gay marriage and abolishing “don’t ask, don’t tell”—radicals scorn as “centrist” and “assimilationist.” The radical goal is to abolish the right of the state to define the terms and procedures that legitimize certain kinds of relationships and not others, and they want to rid the world of armies and war—of the killing machine known as the military. Radical gay people engaged with a wide variety of issues besides “gay liberation” (like the continuing struggle against racial discrimination) do still exist in the gay community, but they lack the influence they once wielded in the half-dozen years following Stonewall.

Another reason that Barbara and David came to seem like ample subjects is that each has large, and (particularly for Barbara) largely unused, archives, which in David’s case include his extraordinary personal correspondence with his parents. (Barbara’s papers are housed at the Schlesinger Library, Harvard, and David’s mostly at the Swarthmore Peace Center.) Their archives are so rich in left-wing history that the further I went in my research, the more obvious it became that to do justice to their lives, and to the movements they were involved with, I’d have to forgo—short of attempting a multivolume work—my original plan to include other figures as well.
But my intention has never been to portray Barbara and David simply as political creatures. That would be an absurd disservice to their rich, highly individualized lives. Both were deeply committed to the social justice issues of their time, but both also had a complex range of personal interests, relationships, loyalties, doubts, and afflictions. Although their political commitments sometimes invaded and complicated their intimate lives, they never wholly consumed them. To even suggest as much, to ignore or minimize their private histories, would be to risk reducing them to cardboard polemicists—which they were not.

I’m certain that my empathy, both political and personal, for Barbara and David had a lot to do with my being drawn to write about them in the first place and may well have affected how I chose to narrate their lives. Although unsympathetic critics—especially those with a centrist or right-wing political bias—will perhaps accuse me of whitewashing my subjects, I’ve nevertheless done my best to recognize and record their foibles and shortcomings.

Empathy, in fact, often expands understanding, just as hostility can restrict it. Most historians (and even some scientists) have come to recognize that a degree of subjectivity (the influence of one’s own experiences and values) will—no matter how conscientiously one tries to adhere to the known evidence—inevitably invade and distort their understanding of events. Besides, historians deal only with that portion of the evidence which happens to survive. Past events can never be fully reproduced as they actually happened. Objectivity remains the goal, but it can only be approached, never entirely achieved. Not even those historians with the most clear-eyed awareness can ever produce a complete or value-free account—which is one reason why history is continuously rewritten.

To acknowledge my identification with Barbara and David is simply to say that somewhat different accounts of their lives could be drawn—but not necessarily more complete or more accurate ones. The best analogy would be a roomful of artists painting the same sitter; although their portraits would vary considerably, each would nonetheless convey, and often valuably, different aspects of the same subject.