A book on the modern history of democracy in Europe does, I suspect, require little justification. Over the years I have been researching and writing about democracy in twentieth-century Europe, I have become conscious of how the past has been increasingly invaded by the present. What began as a historical act of reconstruction has become enmeshed in recent years in the fierce debates about democracy that have come to the fore in Europe as a whole, and within its national and local cultures. This book will, I hope, be a contribution to those wider discussions. But it studies democracy primarily through the prism of history. It is not an attempt to explain the present through the past, and it avoids present-minded concepts of the crisis of democracy or its impending demise. Instead, I hope that the book demonstrates how democracy became a deeply embedded element of Western Europe’s political and social cultures in the decades after 1945. Democracy was not just a political regime. It became part of Europe’s identity, and how post-war generations of Europeans defined who they were, and how they lived their lives. Democracy does of course have to change to adapt to changes in society and in political aspirations; and the latter chapters of this book attempt to explain how dissatisfaction with the existing models of democracy developed in Europe from the 1960s onwards, and have contributed to the present-day sense of crisis.

This is emphatically a European book: in terms of its subject matter, the sources on which it draws, the various locations where it was written, and above all the people who have assisted me along the way. Contemporary European history is a collaborative exercise, and I have long felt myself to be very fortunate in the ways that I have benefited from discussions with colleagues across Europe. During the preparation of this book, I have been especially grateful for the advice, friendship, guidance, and innumerable other forms of assistance I have received from Christian Bailey, Tom Buchanan, Camilo Erlichman, Robert Gerwarth, John-Paul Ghobrial, José Gotovitch, John Horne, Pieter Lagrou, Colin Lucas, Jim McMillan, Jeppe Nevers, Phil Nord, Kiran Patel, Alex Paulin-Booth, Johanna Rainio, Peter Romijn, Alexis Schwarzenbach, and Mary Vincent. In addition, I am indebted to a number of long-standing friends whose support I value greatly; notably, Henrietta Foster, David Grogan, Mario Nehrlich, and Lut Van Daele. Family is of course the network through
which we most readily access the recent past. As mischance would have it, almost all of those who surrounded me during my early life died within a short period of time while I was writing this book. They were all in their different ways witnesses to Europe’s Democratic Age, and I would like to acknowledge the enduring influence of my parents Joan and Steve Conway, my aunt Joan Meadows, my uncles Vivian and George Conway, my godfather Bill Blake, and my cousin Susan Conway.

I am indebted to my colleagues and students in Balliol College and the History Faculty in Oxford, who have provided many different forms of assistance and, most importantly, have provided me with the stimulus of participating in a scholarly community of teaching and research. I am also one of very many who have been fortunate to benefit from the unflagging professionalism of Isabel Holowaty and her colleagues in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Much of this book was written in Combe in West Oxfordshire, and I am indebted to a number of neighbours and friends—especially David Cotterill, Elizabeth Davies, Chris McGrath, Christopher Williamson, and Jo Willis-Bund—for their encouragement and company. Other sections of the book were written, and much of the thinking about it was undertaken, in Isenay, a small village in the Nièvre in central France. I am especially grateful for the support and friendship there of Philippe and Anne-Marie Lafaye, and Daniel and Marie-Claire Kieffer, along with many others.

I am most grateful to Ben Tate and his colleagues at Princeton University Press for their professional assistance and support in bringing this book to publication. During the production of the book, I have been particularly indebted to the skills of Maia Vaswani for her expert copyediting of the text.

My greatest debt, as always, is to Nick Conway and Denise Cripps. It is conventional to apologise for the way in which writing a book has distracted an author from family and other responsibilities. But I think that the experience of researching and writing this book, the time we have spent together, and the discussions it has prompted, has had the opposite consequence. This is a book which has benefited immeasurably from them; and in return it is dedicated to them.