

**MARTIN VAN BUREN:**  
**The Romantic Age of**  
**American Politics**  
 by John Niven  
 Oxford, 1983  
 715 pp. \$35



In April 1844, former President Van Buren wrote to a Mississippi Congressman announcing his opposition to the immediate annexation of Texas. Van Buren's worries about adding another "slave state" to the Union were published in the newspapers and immediately alienated the Southern members of the Democratic Party. The letter thus shattered any chance Van Buren might have had to receive the Democrats' 1844 nomination for the Presidency; it also laid to rest his reputation as a simple opportunist. Niven, a Claremont College historian, has described the four decades of U.S. politics in which Van Buren had a discreet but powerful hand. The career of the Magician (as he was nicknamed for his mastery of manipulation) included stints as a New York legislator and U.S. Senator, Secretary of State, Vice President, and President (1837-1841). Through it all, he fought to uphold such traditional Jeffersonian values as economic decentralization and to establish a strong party system as a check against oligarchy. A trusted adviser of Andrew Jackson, he succeeded as President in fulfilling Jackson's wish for an independent treasury system. His Presidency was jarred by economic crisis (the Panic of 1837), and in 1840, he was soundly defeated by William H. Harrison in an election rife with fraud. Van Buren devoted a lifetime, writes Niven, to "promoting a political system that was based squarely on measure, not men, on nation, not section . . . where politics reflected clear divisions on public policy, not aspirations of individuals or separate interest groups."

**METROPOLITAN**  
**CORRIDOR: Railroads**  
**and the American Scene**  
 by John R. Stilgoe  
 Yale, 1983  
 397 pp. \$29.95

"Railroad iron is a magician's rod," observed Ralph Waldo Emerson, "in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water." Stilgoe, a Harvard professor of landscape architecture, recalls the railroad's transformation of the American scene between 1880 and 1930. Drawing on contemporary accounts in magazines, movies, poetry, and novels, Stilgoe evokes America's romance with the rails: the luxury passenger express (The Orange Blossom Special, The Crescent Limited)