

**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)

"booming over grade crossings"; the hoboos "staring from empty boxcars"; the small-town depots that attracted small boys and their grandfathers. The train, mused one *Atlantic Monthly* writer, was "the poetry of the machine age." Not all was perfect, however. Despite guardrails, signs, whistles, and flashing lights, grade crossings meant death for thousands of pedestrians and passengers in horse-drawn buggies. Residents along the "metropolitan corridor" wandered the tracks dangerously confident of the trains' ability to meet their scheduled comings and goings. One child, explaining the accidental death of his friend, charged that the express was "running on the wrong track." For well over a half-century, writes Stilgoe, the train was the "herald of the future," as modern America outgrew its rural, small-town origins. But once unleashed, progress vanquished even the empire of the rails. Taking the form of the automobile, "the future" left the railroad behind.

### *Contemporary Affairs*

**DANGEROUS CURRENTS:**  
**The State of Economics**  
 by Lester C. Thurow  
 Random, 1983  
 247 pp. \$16.95

Nearly everybody now concedes that our leading economic theories, from Keynesianism to monetarism, are unreliable. Economists and others concur that these "macroeconomic" systems (dealing with the relations between the big variables—inflation, unemployment, and growth) are flawed chiefly because they do not mesh with the bedrock "microeconomic" knowledge about how particular markets work. But long-held notions about the workings of the microeconomic world are just as faulty, insists Thurow, an MIT economist. The shibboleth of the supply-demand mechanism simply does not account for such intangibles as the effect of workers' motivation upon productivity. Yet econometricians proceed to construct abstruse mathematical models that exclude the human factor. Most economists also continue to base their theories on the outmoded behavioral assumption that people are "rational individual utility (income) maximizers." This