is a flawed and thwarted genius whose early glimpse of the relationship between frontier and region remains "the best model for American development that we have from any American historian" (p. 12). Historians have been troubled by the ubiquitous, irrepressible Mr. Turner for more than a hundred years, and Jacobs's important book clears fresh ground for another century of debate.

MICHAEL C. STEINER is professor and chair of American Studies, California State University, Fullerton. He is coauthor of Region and Regionalism in the United States (1988) and Mapping American Culture (1992), and his article "From Frontier to Region: Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Western History" appeared in the November, 1995, issue of the Pacific Historical Review.


"There are so few frontiers left of any kind, mechanical, artistic, political, whatever. Americans like to know there's something happening out there. But it feels like nothing is happening. If it weren't for the gunfire, you'd have a hard time telling the difference between America and Canada" (p. 12). So writes Henry Southworth Allen, critic for the Washington Post, whose articles on contemporary American culture for that newspaper are collected in Going Too Far Enough. Allen has an uncanny knack for identifying the ways that Americans cling to symbols of authentic experience—summer houses, New Hampshire's white steeples, the Kennedys, the ethnic New York of the old Daily News, outlaw hipsters like Dennis Hopper, and fireworks displays on the Fourth of July—even as they know that authenticity is a sham. His essays are simultaneously charming, haunting, and painfully on target in their evocation of Americans' fumbling search for meaning in a nation that has ceased to aspire to anything.

Allen writes with the keen eye of a good ethnographer or film critic, in short bursts of energetic prose that recall the young Tom Wolfe without Wolfe's irritating condescension. And like Wolfe, he is the rare journalist who has steeped himself in the classics of American Studies and much of the recent work in cultural history. "We are sinners in the hands of an angry God," he tells his readers, "and, being Americans, which is to say the offspring of both Adam Smith and John Calvin, we are always on the lookout for a good deal on redemption" (p. 1). But Americans are also a people who know that the days of redemption and a good deal are behind them. The result, Allen suggests, is a country of nomadic nostalgics, aware that their country's noble experiment has fizzled yet unwilling to give up the familiar habit of looking for the main chance.

There are some gems of satirical writing in this book. Allen offers a devastating critique of the "tract mansions" that have
appeared all over the country on what used to be farmland: "huge, exposed things, like beached whales" that "look as if they were delivered rather than built . . . sitting on no more land than it takes to hold the deck and the exhaust fans for the trilevel air-conditioning" (p. 65). Modeled after the pleasure palaces on "Falcon Crest" and "Dallas," and plopped down by streets named after Tory politicians or towns in Provence, they look to Allen "likes houses on the hill without the hill" (p. 67). He describes J. Edgar Hoover addressing journalists in 1968 in the clichéd argot of 1930s gangster movies: "He was a regular museum of forgotten Big Guy moves," whose "face looked as if it might have just risen out of his collar like a meat periscope" (p. 125). And Allen pounces on the foibles of the upper-middle-class "Young Fogies" of the 1980s, "both sexes checking their watches when the waiter asked if they wanted coffee" (p. 177).

For all his gifts as a writer, however, Allen never quite delivers on his promise of a book that will help readers understand "American culture at century's end." Cultural critics once aimed higher, seeking to connect culture to politics, morality, and social structure—if not in some grand theory, then at least in a form of cultural criticism that shaded over into social criticism. Such an aspiration seems terribly quaint in this postmodern moment. Allen is no postmodernist: he cares about history, believes that Americans hold certain ideals in common, and thinks people's professed values have something to do with how they live their lives. But he shares with his postmodernist peers a preference for edifying stories over more systematic analysis. Amid all the chatter about the information age, there is a crying need for a critic with Allen's intelligence who can explain what American culture says about American institutions and the distribution of power at the end of the twentieth century. A criticism that gives up on such an enterprise may be more a symptom than a diagnosis of a culture that stands for nothing.

CASEY BLAKE is associate professor of history and director of the American Studies program, Indiana University, Bloomington. He is working on a book on the politics of public art in postwar America.


Much excellent historical research that is presented at conferences does not reach a larger audience. The publication of this vol-