

BOOKS

What Once Was a Road

By TAMAR JACOBY

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Of all the stateside beats a reporter can be assigned to, few today have the allure — the big important story, the human contrasts, the dark romance — of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Ken Ellingwood arrived on the frontier in mid-1998 and covered it for nearly four years for the Los Angeles Times: a critical period for the region and for U.S. immigration policy. "Hard Line: Life and Death on the U.S.-Mexico Border" is a closely rendered account of what he saw there. It tells the back story — painting the scene and sketching the characters — that lies behind more conventional coverage of immigration: both the political reporting out of Washington and the fractious debate on Fox News and elsewhere. Vivid, humane, and often moving, though ultimately short on analysis, the book underlines both the strengths and weaknesses of the beat journalist's ground-level perspective.

Mr. Ellingwood is a sharp observer, and "Hard Line" is full of quick, telling portraits: diligent Border Patrol agents, hapless migrants, righteous human rights activists, angry anti-immigrant vigilantes, and more. One of the most sharply drawn figures appears under the pseudonym Beatrice. An amiable Republican grandmother, she owns a small hotel in the Arizona town of Bisbee where she feeds and shelters illegal migrants and sometimes even helps them break the law by sneaking them past Border Patrol checkpoints. Still another: ranch-owner militiaman Roger Barnett, who spends in the range of \$10,000 a year on state-of-the-art military equipment that he uses to catch migrants traipsing through his property. (He then turns them over, unharmed, to the proper authorities.) But arguably the most memorable characters in the book are more elemental: the vast, bleak, scorching Arizona desert and the treacherous All American Canal, an 82-mile man-made river with a vicious undertow, which runs along the frontier in eastern California.

The news on the border during the years Mr. Ellingwood was posted there — and indeed for the past decade — has been the sustained U.S. effort to fortify our defenses against illegal immigration. The number of Border Patrol agents has tripled, government spending has more than quintupled, and an arsenal of high-tech devices and new preemptive strategy have transformed what used to be the most porous segments of what locals call *la linea*. This is a major story — all the more so because most of the public doesn't know about it — and Mr. Ellingwood tells it crisply and clearly.

He paints both before and after in living color: the old nightly free-for-alls in places like Tijuana where literally thousands of people used to simply run from one country to the other; the new fences, the new equipment, and the new quality of life in border towns where vagrancy and petty crime have plummeted. But even more importantly — the central thrust of the book — Mr. Ellingwood shines a light on the consequences of these local successes: not, in the end, a decrease in the number of illegal immigrants who make it into the U.S. each year, but merely a shifting of the traffic from old crossing points to new ones.

Some of the new routes are close to the old paths, others in another state entirely. But all have one thing in common: the terrain in the new corridors is much rougher and the distances longer, making the trip more dangerous — to the point that more than 2,000 migrants have died trying to cross in the eight years since the new U.S. strategy was introduced.

Mr. Ellingwood focuses on these deaths with the cold, avenging anger of a prosecutor. The book opens and closes with funerals. It is filled with painful death scenes, grisly corpses, heartbreaking efforts to notify families, and, if not grief, certainly outrage. (There's even an autopsy: flies, stench, and all.) The climax is a minute-by-minute reconstruction of a tragic episode near Yuma, Ariz, in May 2001, in which 14 migrants lost their lives in the sweltering vastness of the desert. And though Mr. Ellingwood goes to great pains to avoid seeming to take

sides, it's ultimately hard not to feel that he intends "Hard Line" as an implicit murder indictment.

The immediate causes of death are usually natural: the desert, that canal, the heat, the cold. But finally, for Mr. Ellingwood, the real villain is U.S. policy. He claims that the Immigration and Naturalization Service knew its crackdown in populated places like Tijuana would drive the traffic to remote areas and that the results there "wouldn't be pretty." He writes sympathetically about human rights activists suing the government for overstepping its right to protect the border and "knowingly" causing the epidemic of deaths. In another chapter, he echoes the view that U.S. efforts to avert future deaths — by sending safety teams out into the desert and the like — are nothing more than "throwing a man into perilous waters, then heaving him a lifeline and asking to be congratulated."

Mr. Ellingwood isn't wrong to be angered by the deaths on the border. But his best answer — more emergency aid in the desert — hardly seems a solution, and ultimately one wishes he would step back and think a little harder about U.S. immigration policy. There can be no doubt: We need a better approach — one that recognizes the realities of the global labor market, safeguards American economic interests, meets our security needs and protects the lives of the poor migrants who come to this country to make a better future for themselves and their families. Mr. Ellingwood admits, albeit grudgingly, that we as a nation need to be in control of our frontiers. But in his heart he seems more sympathetic with the homespun Arizona native who longs for an earlier era when maintaining the line was largely an afterthought: "Used to be we just had roads and places to go," he quotes wistfully. "Now everybody calls it the international border."