



# **Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900 (Studies in Environment and History)**

*Alfred W. Crosby*

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## **Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900 (Studies in Environment and History) Alfred W. Crosby**

People of European descent form the bulk of the population in most of the temperate zones of the world-- North America, Australia and New Zealand. The military successes of European imperialism are easy to explain because in many cases they were achieved by using firearms against spears. Alfred Crosby, however, explains that the Europeans' displacement and replacement of the native peoples in the temperate zones was more a matter of biology than of military conquest. Now in a new edition with a new preface, Crosby revisits his classic work and again evaluates the ecological reasons for European expansion. Alfred W. Crosby is the author of the widely popular and ground-breaking books, *The Measure of Reality* (Cambridge, 1996), and *America's Forgotten Pandemic* (Cambridge, 1990). His books have received the Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize, the Medical Writers Association Prize and been named by the Los Angeles Times as among the best books of the year. He taught at the University of Texas, Austin for over 20 years. First Edition Hb (1986): 0-521-32009-7 First Edition Pb (1987): 0-521-33613-9

## **Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900 (Studies in Environment and History) Details**

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# **From Reader Review Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900 (Studies in Environment and History) for online ebook**

**eldaldo says**

This book blew my mind. Just like Alfred Crosby's previous book, *The Columbian Exchange*, it is a book of both biology and history, my two favorite subjects. But, more than that, it is full of ideas and concepts that I had never really considered before. One big concept is that the Neolithic revolution (agriculture and resulting population densities) was an ecological phenomenon that spread throughout the old world and whichever pre-neolithic people it touched were either conquered and adapted to it or decimated by disease and disappeared. The tragedies of the Americas, Australia and New Zealand are just the most recent occurrences of this phenomenon and are the ones that are most recorded by history.

The book places humans in a place that we have a hard time seeing ourselves. As the dominant species in an ecosystem of our own creation, one of farms and cities. An ecosystem of crops, and weeds, livestock and varmints. The book shows through historical records the ways in which the Europeans along with their extended family of creatures devastated and transformed the "new worlds" from terra incognita into places that very much resembled Europe right down to the dandelion, which still has an empire the sun never sets on.

Some of the ideas are ones which I have read before, particularly the devastating effects of Old World diseases on indigenous peoples not connected to the old world through trade. I have never read Jared Diamond's popular book, *"Guns Germs and Steel,"* and I want to someday, but after all I have read I feel that his book probably should have been titled, *"Germs Germs and Germs."* It is clear to me from reading ecological imperialism that had the American Indians been resistant to European diseases North America would have had a much different history. Despite the fact that I would probably never have existed, I feel remorse and regret for the greatest loss of human life the world has probably ever seen, and I wish it had never happened.

While it's a tragic and heartbreaking story, the biological history of our world is intriguing to me. It helps explain some of the ecological problems our world faces today like invasive species. The ending of the book gives a clear warning that while the depopulation of the new world and its subsequent europeanization led to the greatest food surpluses we have ever had on the planet, surplus of food is not a condition which is historically common for our species. With all the changes happening on our planet right now, are we aware of the ecological source of our historically new found surplus, and are we prepared to figure out how to adjust when it inevitably runs out?

I am super biased because this is the subject that drives me, but I would recommend this book to everyone.

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**Patrick says**

One of the key pieces in the recent movement towards a more materialist/scientific view of history, this book details the ways in which Old World people, plants, animals, and pathogens came to dominate the landscapes Crosby calls "Neo-Europes" -- the regions which were most fully remade by colonization in particular North

America, Australia, New Zealand, the Azores, Canaries, and Madeira, and the pampas of South America. His basic argument is that these regions were the ones most dominated by European *people* because they were the most climactically comfortable for European flora and fauna, and not the other way around. The concept of "weediness" is applied to all forms of life in explaining how certain particularly hardy species took advantage of ecological instability in the wake of disease and shifting human movements to carve out a niche in which more and more newcomers could thrive. Oftentimes the general instability caused by disease and invasive species served as the vanguard of conquest, as indigenous peoples were weakened and disunited. The chapter on New Zealand is particularly fascinating, as a study of the slow changes worked by even small numbers of European visitors on an ecologically isolated area. The explosion from four species of mammals total to millions of heads of sheep and cattle (not to mention cats, rats, and rabbits) is just one particularly illustrative example of the total overhaul it sometimes seems was effected on these landscapes -- often to the despair of the people who had lived there before.

I would have preferred a bit more in the chapter titled "Explanations" -- Crosby gestures at some reasons why European species were successful in the Neo-Europes but New World crops and diseases made less of an impact in Europe, with a basic summation being that the steady stream of new species into colonized regions caused enough instability to open up new niches for the more competitive (because from a larger landmass) species of Europe, but there's very little detail here. He can also be a tad ethnocentric at times. I can give him the benefit of the doubt in some respects -- it's a book about European species outcompeting New World ones, so there's no surprise that he mostly talks about movement in that direction -- but he can go a bit far in proclaiming the "superiority" of various cultures or lifestyles. A bit more focus on colonies which were not remade ecologically in the same way would also have been nice. But I suppose it's not such a bad sign when a book leaves you wanting more -- and judging from the growth of the field, there's plenty more to be found.

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## Cyndi says

While in a few places, Ecological Imperialism is a difficult read it is nevertheless fascinating to delve deeper into World History and see how Europeans settled in different parts of the world. Many times we think of the conquest in terms of military might but there is so much more. Crosby shows that the effects of guns was significant but not nearly as much as the changes in flora, fauna and the effects of diseases ravaged in the New World.

Crosby calls the areas where Europeans were able to successfully settle, Neo-Europes. These include N America, southern South America, Australia and New Zealand.

These areas had similar latitudes and therefore similar climates. The areas has temperate climates, were able to produce commodities in demand in Europe and the native population too small to supply the demand. Interesting to me was why the settlers had such an influence on the new world and why the influence was not reciprocated. Why didn't the foreign seeds that travelled on the bottom of the settlers boots or on their belongings have an effect on Europe like the Europeans imported plants had on the New World? One reason was the amount of tilled ground available. Vast amounts of land were being tilled, giving a home for the stray seeds to plant themselves in and grow.

The weeds that took over proved "crucially important" to the success of the settlers as they healed the burned land saving it from erosion and the "weeds" became feed for the imported livestock. Crosby defines a weed as a plant that, "...spreads rapidly and outcompetes others on distubed soil." There was plenty of disturbed soil where men attempted to settle.

The analogies helped the reader to understand what Crosby meant and several times I enjoyed the writing style and the use of words to create a visual of how things must have been.

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## Ken-ichi says

Walking around with this book made me feel like yet another Berkleyan post-hippy fuming over my unresolved anger and guilt over yet another heinous crime perpetrated by my European cultural forebears: they didn't just enslave Africans, they didn't just exterminate all the Amerindians, but by Gaia, their very ecosystem took over the world! WTF, Columbus?! Where did it end?

To clarify, I am not that guy (well, mostly), and this is not that book (ditto), despite the title. This book is another exploration of the foundations of European success in the rest of the world, particularly in areas where European descendants (genetic and cultural) now dominate (US, Canada, Australia, NZ, Argentina). I believe what made Crosby's work novel in the 1980s was that he didn't confine his analysis to European humans, but also pointed out that European plants, animals, and disease organisms were equally successful in colonizing the temperate world.

Aside from my usual qualms with history (not empirical, often based on scanty evidence, prone to digression, etc) I thought this was pretty good, but being somewhat familiar with some of those who followed in Crosby's footsteps (Diamond, Cronon, Mann), there wasn't too much novelty, and I thought his failure to address the importance of American food crops (maize, potatoes, chilies, tomatoes) to non-American culture and sustenance did some damage to his argument. Frankly the more I read these kinds of books the more I respect the wide scope of Charles Mann's work, despite its failings. I did enjoy Crosby's approach of analyzing failed European colonizations (Norse in North American, the Crusades, British Raj) and of their earliest successful efforts on Atlantic islands like Madeira and the Azores (where they also encountered Neolithic peoples that they had trouble subduing before their diseases took hold). If you believe historians like Crosby, it's remarkable how many large patterns in human migration seem to be predicated on disease.

## Some Notes

The ancient Sumerians worshipped a god (or goddess) of pests named Ninkilim (p. 29). I want to believe Wikipedia's description of her/him as the "lord of teeming creatures" is accurate because it is beautiful and gross and reminds of Annie Dillard's chapter on fecundity in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

*Hafvilla* is an Old Norse word meaning a complete loss of direction at sea (p. 55). Aside from being ripe with metaphoric potential, I find the idea of total geographic disorientation compelling, maybe because it reminds me of Hicksville. Also, new name for my future band and/or pub: Hafvillaphilia.

Like a creeping thing,  
The land is moving;  
When gone, where shall man  
Find a dwelling?

*p. 262, apparently a Maori song, also reminiscent of Hicksville*

I wish the "Explanations" chapter had been longer. Why *are* Eurasian weeds so much more successful than American ones? I don't buy the whole adaptation to disturbance theory. American humans were disturbing

things plenty before European plants arrived, so some American plants should (and are) adapted to disturbance just fine.

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## **Alger says**

A classic that is now more thought provoking than useful as a method of seeing history.

I love this book, and its influence is wide ranging, but an uncritical reading can lead one straight to Jared Diamond style Ecologic Determinism or worse. So it is dated and needs to be read in context, but it is not useless.

Post Script: After reading the reviews here, I think it needs to be emphasized that Crosby was a pioneer in Environmental Studies. This book was written at a time when European superiority was an established fact that Crosby was questioning by moving the discussion from cultural superiority to ecologic; the effect was to move the agency off the innate awesomeness of the white skinned colonialists and onto their bacteria and crops. At the time this was a revelation that sparked research into directions that moved the accepted narrative of American History from displacement and conquest of the natives to infectious diseases opening the way for colonization. This book needs to be judged partly by the ideas it inspired, with the exception of the work of that idiot Diamond. This book is a seminal text of Environmental History.

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## **Tim says**

Well-presented, comprehensive description of the reasons for the success and failures of European organisms as they expanded out of Europe between 900 and 1900. Also addresses the long-historical reasons for the differences between the European and other environments at this time – in this way it precedes, somewhat supplants, somewhat complements, somewhat pre-figures the arguments in the later *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

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## **David says**

Recommended by Michael Pollan (in *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World*) and clearly an important influence on Jared Diamond's

*Guns, Germs and Steel*, this is a good book for people who want to go deeper into current ideas about how the West got where it is (on top) and why (neither because of a superior intellect or a superior capacity for cruelty). The author, Alfred Crosby, doesn't waste the reader's time hyperventilating about the injustice of it all. He just lets a few anecdotes suffice – often moments when European colonial leaders expressed satisfaction at seeing indigenous people dying in large numbers from newly-introduced diseases. If you can't see the villany in that, then, well, probably further explanation will not change your mind.

I don't have a copy of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* at hand, but I don't think that Diamond can be rightly accused of stealing his ideas from this book, assuming Diamond credited Crosby in his bibliography and footnotes. Using and expanding the best ideas of others is the essence of research. Clearly, Diamond used ideas from this book, but he also (rightly or wrongly) expanded them with additional examples (e.g., the discussion of the horse vs. the zebra as domestic laboring animal) and framed the debate in a more accessible fashion (e.g.,

Diamond's friend from Papua New Guinea asking "How did you Westerns end up with all the cargo?").

Compared to novels or popular non-fiction writers like Pollan or Diamond, this book is slow going, but compared to most histories written by academics, it's very readable.

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## **Michael says**

### Introduction

"Europeans, to borrow a term from agriculture, have swarmed again and again and have selected their new homes as if each swarm were physically repulsed by the other." (p.3)

Until as late as 1800 white populations in the Americas, Australia and New Zealand were relatively small, then came the deluge of emigration. 1820-1930 over 50 million Europeans migrated to non-European lands. Crosby believes that technology and ideology only account for part of this movement. Instead, the more basic factors were "biogeographical." The Europeans were attracted to the world's temperate zones, where they could cultivate wheat and raise cattle. Paradoxically, the areas that now export the most foodstuffs 'of European origin are areas that 500 years ago had no European flora or fauna at all. This requires an explanation.

"Perhaps European humans have triumphed because of their superiority in arms, organization and fanaticism, but what in heaven's name is the reason that the sun never sets on the kingdom of the dandelion? Perhaps the success of European imperialism has a biological, an ecological, component. (p. 7)"

### Chapter 6: Within Reach, Beyond Grasp

Why did the Neo-Europeans not thrive in areas like Japan, China, Africa and the Middle East? Essentially Europeans tried to establish colonies in the torrid zone, but failed consistently to do so. The heat and tropical diseases made it impossible for the Europeans to establish successful permanent settlements there. Also, Crosby notes, few European women wanted to go to Asia. In Africa, the Europeans crops and animals did poorly. African diseases killed European plants, animals and people alike. African diseases killed Europeans in the same way that European diseases were to kill the Amerindians in the tropics. In the torrid zones it was climactic conditions that lead to racial mixing, producing Mestizo and Creole populations in Latin America, the Caribbean and the Southern United States. When the Pilgrims embarked to the new world they considered both North American and Guiana, choosing the former over the later for climatic reasons. Though many did die, those who survived were able to thrive in a temperate zone that offered little resistance and much to recommend it in terms of the cultivation of familiar plants and animals from the European continent.

### Chapter 7: Weeds

What enabled the white Europeans to thrive where they did? First of all, they did so because the native populations were decimated by disease. To understand the demographic triumph of Europeans, it is necessary to narrow the scope of inquiry to the eastern third of the N. American continent which actually attracted the most Neo-Europeans. In this region it was the weeds that did the trick, transforming the environment to an hospitable habitation.

Weeds are neither good nor bad, they are merely plants that spread quickly and opportunistically in disturbed soil. Old world plants grew up when old world animals and people destroyed the existing vegetation in the New World. A study of California reveals that it is through the presence of Europeans, largely Spanish motivated by the desire to protect Mexico against Russian incursions, that the weeds of Europe were introduced to the state. Other locales in the East saw the introduction of weeds by colonists, intentionally and unintentionally. Weeds that serve well as forage grasses for the cattle goats and sheep of the colonizers (such as white clover and Kentucky Bluegrass) thrived in the new environment. They were carried westward with settlers and explorers until they met with the resistance of the plains grasses (Buffalo grass and grama grass). Similar fates befell the Pampas in S. America where mallows and thistles grew up with European settlements. The same pattern repeated itself in southern Australia, where most of the population lives. And it was similar plants that took off in all three regions. Strangely enough, this exchange of Flora was amazingly one-sided. North American flora hardly migrated to Europe at all. Instead, the weeds of Europe thrived in the Americas because the Europeans disturbed the natural environment and thereby gave them a foothold. Indeed, by clearing the forests the Europeans cut huge scars into the land that were healed by European weeds, which in turn provided fodder for European animals and fed the settlers.

## Chapter 8: Animals

"The migrant Europeans could reach and even conquer, but not make colonies of settlement of these pieces of alien earth until they became a good deal more like Europe than they were when the marinhieros first saw them. Fortunate for the Europeans, their domesticated and lithely adaptable animals were very effective at initiating that change." (p. 172)

Because of the rapidity with which they reproduced, and the alterations in the environment which they wrought, animals like horses, cattle, pigs, goats, sheep, asses, chickens, cats, etc. had a profound effect on the continent. Omnivorous, fecund and adaptable, the European pig quickly swarmed the Caribbean Islands once brought there by Columbus. Other mariners who came in Columbus' wake actually seeded islands with pigs for the purpose of providing a ready meat supply for future visitors or themselves when they returned. Cattle, having gone feral in the Pampas of South America, reproduced and spread quickly. In North America a cattle frontier developed in the Carolinas and moved slowly westward with settlement. Likewise horses, when introduced by the Europeans in the Americas went feral and developed into vast herds making possible the rise of gaucho culture in S. America and the cowboy culture of the American West. Honeybees too thrived when brought to the New World. On the negative side, Europeans also imported rats which raided grain stores in towns like Buenos Aires, Sydney Australia and almost extinguished Jamestown in the early 17th Century.

"Neo-Europeans did not purposely introduce rats, and they have spent millions and millions of pounds, dollars, pesos, and other currencies to halt their spread usually in vain ... This seems to indicate that the humans were seldom masters of the biological changes they triggered in the Neo-Europes. They benefited from the great majority of these changes, but benefit or not, their role was less a matter of judgment and choice than of being downstream of a bursting dam." (p. 192)

## Chapter 9: Ills

Among the weediest of organisms, pathogens were the most powerful biogeographical force in the Neo-Europes. Indeed, "[i]t was their germs, not these imperialists themselves, for all of their brutality and callousness, that were chiefly responsible for sweeping aside the indigenes and opening the Neo-Europes to demographic takeover. II (p. 198) Some of the diseases with which the Amerindians had no previous contact with included: smallpox, measles, diphtheria, trachoma, whooping cough, chicken pox, bubonic plague,



malaria, typhoid fever, scarlet fever, amebic dysentery and influenza. The impact of exposure was immediate upon contact. Columbus' attempts to bring Indian slaves back to Europe lead to the death from disease of the vast majority.

Amongst the most virulent pathogens was smallpox, which cleared the way for the conquistadors much more effectively than gunpowder in both Mexico (Aztecs) and Peru (Incas). It had a 10-14 day incubation period, which allowed those infected to spread the disease far and wide before symptoms appeared. Smallpox visited the Algonquin in New England and the Huron in the Great Lakes Region of New York (destroying 50% of that population). The same happened on the Pampas and in Australia. To give a quick impression of the impact of this pathogen on the indigenes, he points to De Soto's account of heavily populated areas of the American South that he encountered in the mid-16th C. Later explorers and settlers would describe the same regions as lightly populated. In the interim, disease had cleared the way for settlement. Even at De Soto's time, the presence of European diseases had weakened the populations. This exchange of pathogens, as the exchange of flora and fauna, was remarkably one-sided. Venereal Syphilis being the only New World import to the Old.

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### **Shreedhar Manek says**

This was an easy read, and very interesting. I could read it almost like a novel. There were quite a few 'Oh!' and 'Aha!' moments that I had while reading *Ecological Imperialism*.

Crosby tells us through his book about how and why European imperialism gained the success that it did. That there was something more to just skillful warfare - and that something gave Europeans the push that they required to establish 'Neo-Europes' as he calls them, around the world.

Something that I found lacking in the book is the almost total disregard to the Indian subcontinent. There are some thoughts here and there, but nothing significant. I would have loved to read about how European imperialism affected the Indian subcontinent in terms of its ecology.

Oh and it felt that Crosby repeated himself too much. The editor should have taken better care of that.

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### **Joeji says**

This book seems to argue for a new understanding of world and colonial history but instead just ends up reinforcing old environmental determinist tropes about the superiority of Europe and the inferiority of the rest of the world. Even if Crosby never explicitly makes such arguments, his sloppy use of metaphor betrays an understanding of cultures as high or low, depending on their relationships to technology, nature, etc. further, he seems to define culture as a behaviorist-biological phenomenon (pgs. 13-14) mirroring eugenic arguments of the early 20th century. In all, this book does little to show us a new history; instead, it is another social science text that presents supposedly common sense arguments that are in actuality steeped in Eurocentric thought.

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## **Michael says**

This book gets sort of a low-four star rating, because it doesn't go much beyond what it sets out to do, but what it sets out to do is ambitious and impressively handled. Crosby begins by asking why human European emigrants and their descendants have come to live throughout the temperate zones of the world, then goes on to point out that they have brought their native biotas along with them, allowing for the transformation of local ecologies into what he refers to as “Neo-Europes.” The dandelion, once a resident primarily of Europe, now spans the globe. Sheep and cows, wheat and other European foodstuffs are cultivated from Argentina to New Zealand, and throughout North America, having been brought from the small peninsula known as Europe and its nearby islands. Crosby explores this ecological transformation in some detail. It includes the introduction of new diseases that destroyed native human and non-human populations, technological advances, and the desire of Europeans to emigrate to “unspoiled” lands, while bringing familiar surroundings with them.

For an older book, this has dated fairly well, and some of its theses have since been popularized (for example in *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*). It seems to me that he somewhat downplays the importance of the European adoption and exploitation of New World flora and fauna such as turkeys, bananas, potatoes, and corn, which would perhaps add to his understanding of the biological implications of imperialism. Crosby is also sometimes careless about citing sources for his statistical information, for example of page 302 he discusses the population growth of Europe without clearly explaining where he found his numbers.

The thing I best recall about reading this book was learning that humans have traditionally killed off or domesticated larger life forms (mammoths, predators, etc) as they have colonized new areas. This doesn't just apply to obvious “imperialists” such as Europeans, the “indigenous” peoples did the same thing after they first landed in the Americas and Oceania. It also shifted my understanding of what imperialism is, from a largely political, to a more broadly biological, definition. In all, a worthwhile read if not a life-changing one.

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## **André Sá says**

Mais história que biologia, e a parte mais essencial foi mal explorada a meu ver...Não obstante levanta importantes questionamentos e dá uma panorama que eu ainda não tinha domínio

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## **Erica Criscione says**

i did not like this book it was just boring to me

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## **Cynthia Moore says**

This took me months to read. I managed to read it in between 1491 and 1493. Both of those books dealing with Columbus and the effect he had on civilization. This book analyzes and brings to light many things most of us do not even bother to think about. World history dissected under a microscope.

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## Adam says

This classic of biogeography has been on my to-read list for a few years (I'm not sure where I got the rec from - possibly *Against the Grain: How Agriculture Has Hijacked Civilization?*). I was under the impression it was a narrower and less fully formed iteration of Jared Diamond's ideas in *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. There is a lot of overlap between the two, especially in the epidemiological arena (really an older idea than either of them, and Crosby goes so far as to name it "William Hardy McNeill's Law"), but Crosby has a fresh authorial voice, a subtly different question, and compellingly different answers.

While Diamond is interested in explaining a political and economic reality (disparity of "cargo" possession) using geographic factors, Crosby asks an ecological question: why did Europeans end up multiplying and displacing the native inhabitants in a few other continents and not others? The questions aren't that different, since the process of colonization was also the process of rapidly obtaining massive wealth. It is imaginable that one could occur without the other, however: siphoning resources out of productive colonies like India, Mexico, and the Congo without substantially replacing their populations. Asking the question with a different frame gave Crosby answers that felt new to me after taking Diamond's ideas for granted for ages.

Crosby interestingly insists on describing the "Columbian Exchange" with his "seams of Pangaea" concept. These seams - the rifting lines which have by geologic definition not been crossed during the dispersal of Gondwana and Laurasia's bits - are the only new lines that European explorers traversed; the addition of India to the Asian continent and the land bridge between the Americas both united chunks of disparate Gondwana and Laurasia, with all the consequences that entailed for their biota. In spite of these mix-ups in geologic time, the evolutionary relevance of the concept remains: each separate continent had stabilized a unique set of ecosystems by the Pleistocene.

In that vein, Crosby metaphorizes the indigenous colonization of Australasia and the Americas as the "shock troops" of the later European invasion. This is an ecologically interesting argument because the Pleistocene extinction event eliminated many of the more fantastic organisms that differentiated the Neo-Europes from the Old World, and thus swept away a major source of competition (which proved problematic in, eg South Africa). Fortunately, he doesn't push it too far past its usefulness (after all, he still needs to explain why the main front did so much harm to these indigenous shock troops).

I don't mean to spoil it for you, but Crosby's main thesis is that the European expansion to the "Neo-Europes" was successful and one-way because the early and widespread emergence of agriculture there created a whole codependent biota adapted to disturbance, from fire, grazing, and the plow. When this biota was introduced into the stable climax ecosystems of the New World, it succeeded because it created a leap-frogging wave of disturbance and weed colonization. Disease organisms caused catastrophic population crashes in the most prominent ecosystem engineer, humans, leaving an ecosystem in flux. Livestock destroyed herbs that hadn't seen a grazer since the Pliocene. Colonists lit fires and logged extensively, opening new pasture and farm land to support their weeds. Without European weeds, all this change could have resulted in catastrophic soil erosion; weeds covered the bare ground and did damage control for human mismanagement. All this happened in relative absence of the pests and diseases and competition that limited growth at home (while the disease load was disastrously high for natives, sparse populations and good nutrition made the colonies vastly more healthy for colonists than Europe).

Crosby's ultimate answer is that civilization was aided in its conquest of the Neo-europes by a biota adapted to civilization's own rather severe mode of environmental modification. Few neo-european organisms went the other way because the environment in the Old World was simply too harsh for them. The disease issue is partially a consequence of the Old World's high population densities, poor sanitation, and contact with a broad array of livestock. It is also sort of a distinct issue, a consequence of separation, long exoduses and changes of climate that shook off the disease organisms and left Native Americans and the Maori living in a near-paradise where plague was nearly unknown.

Unlike Diamond, Crosby never really addresses why Europe was the portion of the Old World that crossed the seams of Pangaea and not India, Ethiopia, Nigeria, or China. He also fails to explore the implications of his explanation even to the extent I portrayed it above (perhaps I'm reading too much into it?).

In the first part of the book, Crosby's prose seems full of pithy and sharp phrases, like "The Crusader states died like bowls of cut flowers," which makes it fun to read. This kind of trails off into the later parts of the book, though, and the narratives become a bit dull. In general, a lot of the information presented seems a bit gratuitous, demonstrating the plausibility of his points rather than proving the validity of his arguments. This makes the book feel loose and superfluous in parts. The conclusion really peters out: just as he's getting to the interesting bits, he seems to lose focus and drive. The long-awaited revelation of Chapter 11 kind of dribbles out in a disorganized slew.

Despite all those flaws, Crosby does raise a lot of interesting points, and he treats weeds, livestock, and disturbance as forces that shift ecosystem dynamics (which is interesting and seems crucial) more closely than any other author I've met. He seems a bit ahead of his time in that respect (a lot of the ideas from *The Work of Nature: How The Diversity Of Life Sustains Us*, a much more recent book, feel like they could be valuably applied to an update of Crosby's work), so perhaps he should be forgiven for the amount of hand-waving that comes in when he discusses what consequences the spread of weeds and bovids actually had.

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## **Ioana says**

This book sounds/looks amazing, and I was so excited to finally get around to it (it's been sitting on my shelves for a few years). Alas, it turned out to be a non-critical, awfully confused hodge-podge of random strands from various disciplines (ecology, history, anthropology, geography) strung loosely together into a knotted mess that made it clear that Crosby does not have adequate knowledge in ANY field, certainly not enough to write such an important work.

Crosby engages in such tactics as quoting scripture to explicate historical events, making wild claims, i.e. nothing major happened between the domestication of horses ~5k years ago and the imperialism instigated by Europe in the 1000s, *without offering any evidence or support for this claim* (I wonder if Biblical, Greek, Sumerian, African, Chinese, etc etc historians would agree?), and frequently "guessing" or "approximating" major evolutionarily important dates. A glaring flaw of his work is that it is EXTREMELY NON-RIGOROUS (despite the citations, which, like I said, include biblical references).

But, much worse, Crosby displays a complete lack of understanding of ALL social, psychological, critical perspectives on human behavior. He claims, for example, that "culture is a system of storing and altering patterns of behavior not in the molecules of the genetic code but in the brain". Now, Crosby might want to look up some cultural theorists, Foucault, Gramsci, Adorno, any feminist, whoever - I'm pretty sure he will find ZERO support for his definition of "culture" amongst this group. This sentence is thrown out there as

the SOLE explication of "culture", while the concept is then summarily dismissed.

Excluding cultural/critical perspectives, Crosby's work already cannot do what it sets out to: explain the ecological impact of imperialism, for *imperialism is a "critical" concept*. It is not a "given", but a pattern of human activity laden with significance, meaning, history, structures of thought, contradictions, violence, etc. etc. And you simply CANNOT write an supposedly-academic book about ecological imperialism while taking imperialism for granted.

This tragically flawed foundation becomes apparent early on in the work, as it becomes abundantly clear that Crosby writes like a blindly privileged white man who takes Europe's "superiority" for granted (even as he *claims* to be writing about the awful impact of Europe's imperialism). For example, he asks himself "why the New World was so tardily civilized?" (of course, the meaning of civilization is left unexplored, it's just taken for granted that civilization is good, and that the "new" world was not civilized), "why the American Neolithic revolution was so inferior to that in the Old World", and the like. He also commits an endless stream of uncritical faux-pas, such as claiming animals are our "servant species" and writing that "superman arrived on earth about 3000 years ago" (wth has this guy not heard of Hitler's appropriations of Nietzsche?).

**Of course, there's just so much garbage here because Crosby has NO FOUNDATION on which to stand - he claims to be a scientist but quotes the Bible, he claims to be a historian but eschews critical perspectives, he claims to write about imperialism and culture but doesn't circumscribe either. DO NOT WASTE YOUR TIME!**

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### **Daniel Burton-Rose says**

This book opened up an important line of inquiry, but in Crosby's blithe hands the consideration of the role of micro-organisms and animals in "softening up" of indigenous populations before the arrival of European settlers too easily turns into an excuse for decimation and genocide.

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### **Austin Matthews says**

The book is worth placing at the 5 star level for the explanation. However, it is very repetitive and some passages are repeated in multiple chapters. I felt like reading only the country-by-country case study could provide adequate information for someone only moderately interested.

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### **Stephen says**

Combined with "1491", this did a lot to complexify my understanding of European conquest and colonization of the New World and Oceania. Crosby's case study of the Spanish conquest of the Canary Islands, in particular, demonstrates how invaders have a very steep hill to climb even with "guns, germs, and steel," and that only a combination of virgin-soil epidemics and continuous military pressure actually ensured the native people's defeat. (It was far from a sure thing otherwise: see, for example, the Crusades.)

It's a very provocative thesis; combined with the descriptions of what Native Americans were doing to change the New World environment to suit them, it paints a picture of humanity as masterful terraformers. It

also highlights the catastrophe that befell the vanguard of human expansion - that is, the First Peoples - when they were re-united with elements of main body of humanity, along with all the familiar diseases. (The implications for human colonization of outer space are interesting.)

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## **Jerry says**

Crosby is a great writer and he has intriguing things to say. However, he is incredibly Eurocentric and Christian biased. It can grow tiring hearing how great Europeans are compared to the ethnic groups they conquered (often brought up with belittling and/or unflattering terms). Shame, really, because it totally undermines what could have been a splendid little history of the European conquest of the rest of the world. I recommend at least perusing the book if you're interested in the subject, but be aware that this is a very ethnocentric view on the topic.

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