

Title—Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900

Author—Alfred W. Crosby

Year—1986

Categories: World History, Environment, Migration

Place: The World (The West)

Time: 900-1900

Argument Synopsis:

Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* follows up on his argument in *The Columbian Exchange*, which attempted to demonstrate that the European expansion around the world post-1492 was accompanied by an astonishing migration of plants, animals, and diseases. This book crafts a close reconstruction of the ecological and demographic consequences of European expansion, with a focus on the plants, animals, and diseases that went out from Europe. Crosby's book strives to answer many of the theoretical questions left unanswered by *The Columbian Exchange*. The book attempts the broadest synthesis yet of the ecological repercussions of European expansion. Crosby begins by discussing the ecological reasons why medieval European expansion stalled in both Greenland (Vikings) and the Holy Land (Crusaders). He then contrasts this experience with the successful European excursion into the Atlantic Islands, i.e. the Azores, Madeiras, and Canaries. This comparison is used to support his argument that Europeans were most successful when they occupied ecosystems capable of sustaining the cultigens, domesticated animals, and diseases on which much Old-World culture and agriculture depended.

While Crosby's first book on the subject was more concerned with tracking the movement of environmental actors from Europe to the New World, *Ecological Imperialism* attempts to understand why Europe, and only Europe, were the successful imperialists. Crosby notes how conventional historical accounts tend to point to the European superiority in terms of weapons and ships, while ignoring the role played by environmental factors. He argues that these factors have been overemphasized at the expense of the environment. However, in his attempt to foreground the role played by environmental factors, cultural and political factors are not given much attention at all.

Crosby claims that much of European success in the field of imperialism was due to the success of European pests, parasites, and pathogens in the regions being conquered. In other words, European firepower was effective against populations that had already been debilitated by European fauna and flora. Crosby demonstrates how in both Australia and the Americas the native population of people, plants, and animals were rapidly replaced by their European invaders. He argues that Europeans flourished most in temperate and thinly-populated regions, where the ecosystems could support these Old-World plants and animals.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Global wind systems were finessed by simple theories of symmetrical circulation so as to permit bolder voyaging across the seas
- Success of invading Europeans depended on the success of their ecological co-invaders (disease, plants, animals)
- Part of Europe's success was due to the behaviors of indigenous people prior to colonization in Australia and the Americas, namely the extinction of potentially competitive animals