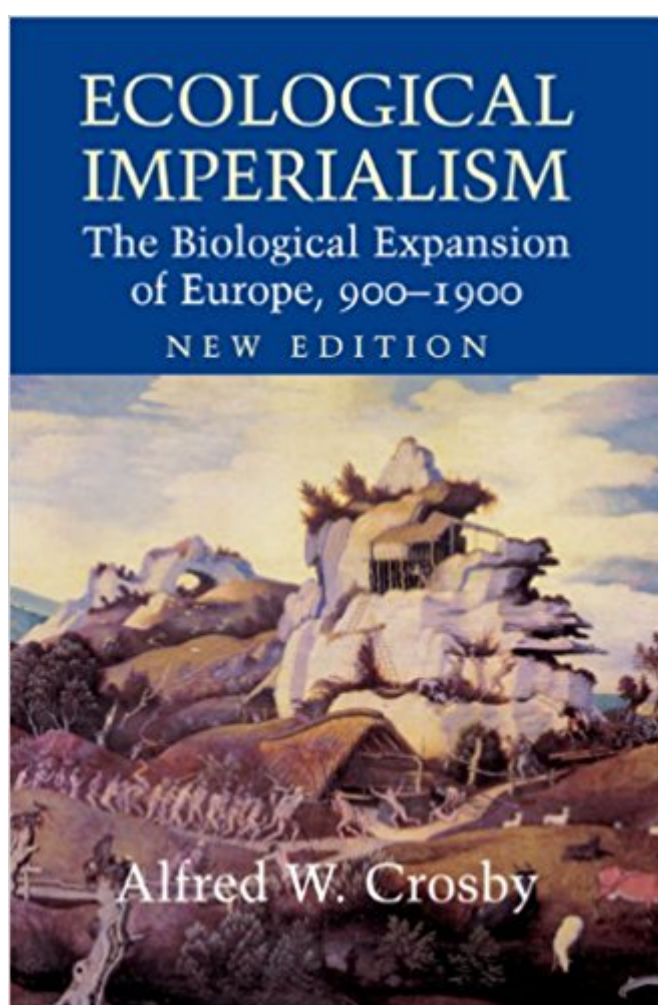


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# Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion Of Europe, 900–1900 (Studies In Environment And History)



## Synopsis

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; in many cases they were a matter of firearms against spears. But, as Alfred Crosby maintains in this highly original and fascinating book, the Europeans' displacement and replacement of the native peoples in the temperate zones was more a matter of biology than of military conquest. European organisms had certain decisive advantages over their New World and Australian counterparts. The spread of European disease, flora, and fauna went hand in hand with the growth of populations. Consequently, these imperialists became proprietors of the world's most important agricultural lands. Now in a new edition with a new preface, Crosby revisits his now-classic work and again evaluates the global historical importance of European ecological expansion.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In his book, *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe*

900-1900

•, Alfred Crosby gives a robust historical account of European imperial conquest in the places he calls Neo-Europes. He defines the Neo-Europes as places outside Europe, where European flora and fauna, including humans, supplanted native once, as a result of European colonial incursions between 900 and 1900. He differentiates the Neo-Europes from a place like South Africa, where Europeans only dominated politically, but could not transform the entire landscape to resemble that of mainland Europe. The crux of Crosby's account is that European imperialism was successful in the Neo-Europes – North America, parts of South America, Australia, and New Zealand – in the scale that it did, not because of European military and technological might as has been the dominant explanation but because of ecological and geographical fortuity. Crosby tries to answer the questions why and how people of the European race – unlike other races who are sited within given spatial gamut – are settled in various places, distant to each other, across the globe. Obviously, scores of people must have crossed the seams of Pangaea to these continents, but how? Crosby answers this question with a good history of navigation, which involves the discovery of the physical geography of the sea and an understanding of the global wind system – the key to the success of navigation. The discovery of the behavior of the oceans by the ancient explorers and the marinheiros made mass immigration possible. With regard to how European flora and fauna came to dominate the Neo-Europes, Crosby gives credit to the climate as well as European weeds, and feral animals. Once the New World's ecology had been disturbed, weeds of European descent shoved the native flora aside and created fertile grounds for European organisms to thrive. The argument is that weeds do well in lands that witness dramatic disturbances; hence, the grazing of European animals and the felling of trees for timber disturbed the new land – erosion. Weeds then took over these disturbed lands and stabilize them by covering up the soil against erosion and the scorching sun, creating much more fertile soil for European plants and grazing fields for European animals. According to Crosby, the coup d'état that led to the obliteration of native populations in the Neo-Europes, and led a successful demographic take-over by Europeans, was not successful because of the brutality and superior weapons of the imperialist, but it was a concealed lethal weapon – disease – which they carried unknowingly that brought them victory. Native populations in the Neo-Europes lived in pockets of sparsely populated settlements, and largely engaged in hunting and gathering. This way of living made them vulnerable to new germs and diseases. The lack of success of European imperialism in places such as Africa and Asia, According to Crosby, was due to their resistance to

European germs, and the presences of equally deadly disease, which the Europeans stood the chance of contracting. The explanation given for this is that Asians and Africans, like Europeans, lived in compact settlements with domesticated plants and animals, which exposed them on a constant basis to germs and diseases that developed from that way of living. As a result, they eventually developed some resistance to these germs and diseases. This comparison of the Neo-Europes with Africa and Asia, in my opinion, makes Crosby's argument more plausible. If indeed, it was the superior weapons of the colonialist that led to the creation of the Neo-Europes, why was the situation different in Africa and Asia? According to Crosby, the natives of the Neo-Europes, already thinly populated, succumbed to European disease such as small pox, measles, dysentery, catarrhal jaundice, whooping cough, mumps, tonsillitis, and host of other diseases. Already weakened by diseases; the natives could not put up any meaningful resistance to European imperialism. In a nutshell, Crosby gives credit to European organisms – weeds, feral animals, and pathogens – for the European imperial success in the Neo-Europes. He described these organisms, which he calls portmanteau biota, as working as a team to usurp the native biota for the eventual Europeanization of the Neo-Europes. Crosby's account does away with the usual misconception that natives lived in total harmony with their environment. Although the scale of native impact on the environment – the first wave of invasion – may have been much less than the European invasion – the second wave – they nevertheless left ecological footprints. This book also gives a background to western economic dominance over the rest of the world, as it talks about how they were able to appropriate resources from distant lands. The holistic approach Crosby adopts in his account, in my view, makes this book appealing and readable across disciplines – as a geographer, the chapter on the winds was particularly very informative to me, as I have known the direction of the global winds, but not the history behind their discovery. I also took some biology lessons from reading this book; particularly, the behavior of weeds and pathogens. In one of the chapters, Crosby compares European weapons to those of natives, in an effort to downplay the issue of superior weapons as the main driving force of European imperialism. Although the Europeanization of the Neo-Europes had nothing to do with their superior weapons, the military might of the European colonialists cannot be belittled. What explanation will be given for European political dominance elsewhere? I believe Crosby could have still made a strong case for disease without drawing this comparison.

I took a course from Professor Crosby at the time he was writing "The Columbian Exchange." In

some respects, "Ecological Imperialism" is a companion work. Both carefully examine interactions between the Old and the New Worlds and the impacts these have had on economics, cultures, health, and natural environments. I read the first edition of "Ecological Imperialism" when it was published a number of years ago. I can't determine how much new material this edition contains; nevertheless, far more people need to be aware of the crucial issues disclosed in Professor Crosby's study.

This book looks at the role science plays in history. I found this interesting. I had always wondered WHERE some of these rotten weeds, animals and germs come from. This book does it. It was an interesting read, if you like science, check this out.

My nephew loves it

I like Crosby's bantering style and his loads of mini-stories. But the question he asks is not something I've worried about for several decades. How did European people get so dominant over the most productive corners of the planet? The answer is complex and entwined with the ecological factors of germs, weeds, livestock, or trade winds. It's interesting. But all my life I've been watching as all region's of the world expanded, and no people, organisms, or environments seem too relatively dominant any more. Crosby explains a 500-or-so year blip in world history, up to the time his book ends around 1900. But since then, we've had a revival of native people, plants, and animals in the regions most colonized by Europeans, and we're dealing with corporate rather than ethnic imperialism over the natural world. Crosby explains the rise of Euro-societies from Australia to the USA, and it's a fascinating look backward. But the book doesn't deal with the factors of integration making for a globalized environment that's evolving beyond ecological imperialism.

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