
ALFRED W. CROSBY

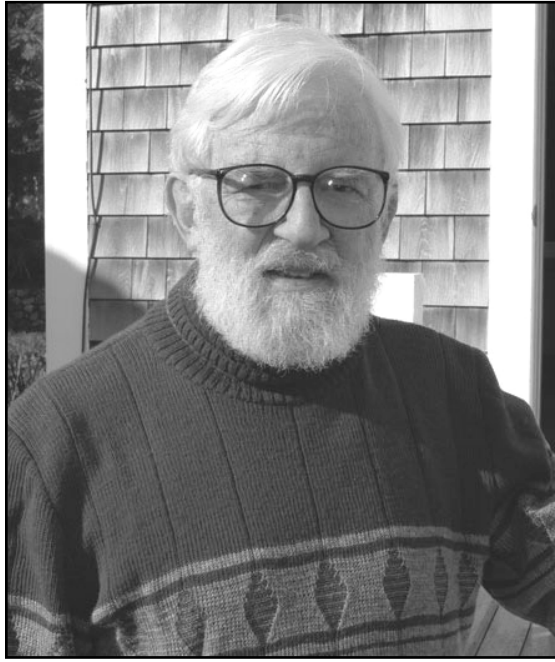


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Alfred Worcester Crosby, Jr., professor emeritus of American studies, geography, and history at the University of Texas at Austin, died on March 14, 2018, at the age of 87. He had lived on Nantucket Island, Massachusetts, since retiring in 1999. He was widely known for two transformative books, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (1972) and *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (1986), with translations in more than a dozen languages. Environmental historian Donald Worster praised Crosby as “an intellectual leader of revolutionary significance”; *The New York Times* referred to him as “the father of environmental history.” Crosby preferred a broader term, “ecological history,” to refer to the field he helped found, and defined it as “the history of all organisms pertinent to human history and their (our) environment.”

Al was born in Boston on January 15, 1931, to Alfred Worcester Crosby and Ruth Frances (Coleman) Crosby. After graduating from high school in Wellesley, he entered Harvard College in 1948. Al recalled the experience of a commuter student as “a lecture hall at the end of a subway tunnel,” but he did seek out composer Aaron Copland during office hours “and held forth to him about jazz,” a lifelong enthusiasm. Crosby majored in modern European history, graduated in 1952, and then spent two years in the U.S. Army, stationed in the Panama Canal Zone. He completed a master’s in teaching at Harvard in 1956 and a Ph.D. in history at Boston University in 1961. In 1965, he published his dissertation virtually without revision as *America, Russia, Hemp, and Napoleon: American Trade with Russia and the Baltic, 1783–1812*. By then Crosby had taught U.S. history at Albion College for a year and at Ohio State University for four years. After a year at San Fernando Valley State College, he moved to Washington State University (WSU) in 1966, where he remained until 1977.

Protests over the Vietnam War and racial injustice convulsed Washington State during Al’s time there. In the fall of 1968, as administrators pondered student demands for an Afro-American history course, Al offered a 16-lecture “colloquy” on the subject at an off-campus center for political activism. After the course was added to the university catalog, Al taught it for at least two years. Johnnetta Betsch Cole, a co-founder of WSU’s Black Studies program and later president of Spelman College, recalled Al as “the Irish White guy from Boston,” her “brother in the struggle for social justice.” In May 1970, after the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, as 800 students occupied the university’s administration building, Al was one of three radical faculty leaders to address them through a bullhorn. He later assisted in building a health center for Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers’ Union in

Delano, California, and campaigned for Black Panther Party candidates during city elections in Oakland. Former student Molly Martin praised him as “the rare professor who bridged the generation gap and communed with us students.”

Regarding his early career, Al declared, “after about ten years of muttering about Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, you really need some invigoration from other sources. Then, I fell upon it, starting with smallpox.” While routinely teaching the U.S. history survey at WSU, he wrote *The Columbian Exchange*, the book that made his career. Its preface stated his fear “that historians, geologists, anthropologists, zoologists, botanists and demographers will see me as an amateur in their particular fields.” *The Columbian Exchange* hypothesized the “catastrophic and bountiful” coming together of Europe and America, two isolated biological spheres, each with its own microbes, fauna, and flora, as the most significant impact of European “discovery” of America—far more important than traditional narratives of colonizers and colonized. The resulting “trend toward homogeneity,” as Crosby later described it, was “one of the most important aspects of the history of life on the planet since the retreat of the glaciers.” The book’s thesis was so revolutionary that a dozen publishers turned it down before Greenwood Press took a chance. Reviewers praised the book as innovative. A review in the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* described Crosby as one of those historians who “emerges . . . once in a great while” with a “precious ability to synthesize information that many plodding researchers have compiled” to reach “a vitally important set of concepts.”

In 1976, his final year on the Washington State faculty, Crosby published his third book, *Epidemic and Peace, 1918*, a history of the influenza pandemic researched during a two-year fellowship at the University of California, San Francisco funded by the National Institutes of Health. Unlike *The Columbian Exchange*, this book offered a traditional historical narrative, but it meditated on interactions of microbes with specific human events, on social constructions of disease, and on human life’s irreducible dependence on unpredictable biological factors.

Al arrived at the University of Texas in 1977 as visiting associate professor of American studies and history, having been recruited to provide the American studies program with expertise in comparative studies. He had just completed a year as research fellow at the National Humanities Institute at Yale University, followed by a semester teaching at Yale as Cardozo-Furst Visiting Professor of American History. Yale’s eminent U.S. colonial historian Edmund S. Morgan, in recommending Crosby to administrators at Texas, had praised *The Columbian*

Exchange as a “pioneer work” with “exciting new perspectives on nearly every field of history.” In 1979, Crosby was appointed professor of American studies and geography, and he later accepted a courtesy appointment in history. He spent his first semester as full professor on a Fulbright research fellowship at the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, New Zealand. Al’s teaching initially focused on medical geography and the history of medicine. Later it encompassed U.S. ecological history, history of science, popular writing about science, and the history of jazz.

For nearly a decade, Al’s students witnessed him working out the themes of his next major book, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (1986). With this project Crosby stepped even further away from standard historical topics than he did with *The Columbian Exchange*. He sought to understand how colonizing Europeans had vanquished Native peoples and established themselves in “Neo-Europes” scattered across the world’s temperate zone (sections of North and South America, Australia, and New Zealand). Confounding postcolonial accounts of European greed and genocide as well as obsolete racist doctrines of European superiority, Crosby proposed that invasive European microbes, flora, and fauna (including domestic animals) had met little competition from native species and had aided their human hosts’ military and social conquests. This foray into big-picture ecological history prompted William Cronon to declare it Crosby’s “most impressive contribution to date—tightly argued, beautifully written and quietly daring in its historical vision.” As one of Al’s Austin colleagues pointed out, the broad scope of *Ecological Imperialism* rendered ordinary human events of the sort treated by most historians as mere epiphenomena.

Ecological Imperialism became an instant classic. To date, Google Scholar records 4,719 citations, compared with 3,066 for *The Columbian Exchange* and some 3,200 for Al’s other six books combined. *Ecological Imperialism* was awarded the Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize by the Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1987. It also brought Crosby a Guggenheim Fellowship for 1987–1988 to begin researching his next book, *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250–1600* (1997), which to some extent contradicted *Ecological Imperialism*. Crosby considered the question of whether advances in methods of manipulating numbers might have afforded a competitive edge to western cultures over other cultures lacking in sophisticated mathematics. He was not afraid to complicate and even somewhat undermine his own positions.

Ecological Imperialism brought invitations to speak from around the world. Between its publication and 2010, when Al gave his final

public lecture at the University of London, he presented more than 60 papers and addresses in places as far-flung as Hawaii, France, the Dominican Republic, Spain, Mexico, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Italy, and Japan. He served twice as Bicentennial Fulbright Professor of North American Studies at the University of Helsinki (1985–1986 and 1997–1998), sharing the latter appointment with his spouse Frances Karttunen. During the 1991–1992 academic year, Crosby was a visiting professor of world history at the University of Hawaii, and in 1999, after retiring from the University of Texas, he was a visiting professor at Umeå University in Sweden. Other honors included receiving an honorary doctorate from Grinnell College (1992); being named an Academician of the Academy of Finland (1995), one of only 30 non-Finns so honored in the past 50 years; being appointed as a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1995), the Texas Institute of Letters (1996), the American Philosophical Society (2000), and the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University (2012); and being honored by the European Science Foundation (2007), the World History Association as one of its Pioneers (2009), and the American Historical Association with its Award for Scholarly Distinction (2013).

Through all the acclaim, Al focused on research and writing, while remaining amused by follies of everyday life and academic politics. Colleagues at Texas learned that Al marched to a different drummer. To the few departmental administrative posts that came his way, he brought the same iconoclastic spirit he displayed at Washington State. During a brief period as acting director of American studies, Al found himself at odds over policy with a rules-oriented administrator. Armed with conviction, he marched across campus to do battle, dressed in his usual T-shirt, khaki shorts, and flip-flops. His independent perspective set him apart both as a person and as a scholar. To an interviewer he admitted being “an oddball intellectually.” While writing about microbes, sheep, and Spanish flu, he could not expect to lead “legions of profs and grad students” who “ordered their lives to such things as the New Deal.” Blunt, at times sarcastic, but always tolerant and good-natured, Al projected an unassuming directness more appropriate to a union hall than a faculty lounge.

Al did not let up after retiring from Texas but produced two more books: *Throwing Fire: Projectile Technology through History* (2002) and *Children of the Sun: A History of Humanity's Unappeasable Appetite for Energy* (2006). Both studies encompassed the broadest possible perspective on the history of technology. Research for *Throwing Fire* involved Al, an avid baseball player with a hard, accurate throw, in such diversions as learning to use an atlatl, a Native

American spear-throwing device. *Children of the Sun*, an account of the destructive effects of accelerating energy consumption, was written at a high school level in order to reach the widest possible audience. Like Al's more influential projects, these books displayed a multidisciplinary scope and demonstrated his ability to look from the outside, to synthesize arrays of seemingly unrelated data, to define key moments of transformation in areas of history in which he was not an expert, and above all to project clear and obvious conclusions everyone had missed.

Al remained politically active throughout his life. In Austin he protested against nuclear armament and participated annually in the Martin Luther King Day march. He opposed the invasion of Iraq by demonstrating weekly in front of the Nantucket post office, where he and others read the names of U.S. troops who had died in combat. Al was also an avid birdwatcher—an avocation demonstrating his interest in ecology was personal as well as intellectual. The personal touch extended to Al's writing style, with a colleague describing him as one of those rare scholars whose voice can be "heard" internally as one reads his prose.

Al Crosby is survived by Frances Karttunen, his wife of 35 years; by his son Kevin and Kevin's wife Pamela Mieth; by his daughter Carolyn Crosby and his grandchildren Allegra and Xander Crosby-Laramie; and by his stepdaughters Jaana Karttunen and Suvi Aika and their families.

Elected 2000

JEFFREY L. MEIKLE

Stiles Professor in American Studies
University of Texas at Austin