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Environmental Historian: *An Interview with Alfred W. Crosby*

Alfred W. Crosby is the author of such influential works as The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1973). *He lives in retirement on Nantucket Island with his wife Frances Karttunen, noted in her own right for important works in linguistics and history. In September, 2013, I had the opportunity to carry on a long conversation with Crosby about his work, American Studies, and the future for environmental history. Crosby suffers from Parkinson's disease. His mind is sharp and his insights are keen. The Columbian exchange is the phenomenon of the contact period in which European crops and animals were imported into the New World, while New World crops and animals were introduced into Europe.*

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JFS: Recently, in 2012, the John Carter Brown Library celebrated the 40th anniversary of the publication of *The Columbian Exchange* by honoring you and inviting Charles Mann, author of the volumes *1491* and *1493*, to present a lecture for the event. How did you come to write *The Columbian Exchange*?

AWC: When I was very young, Columbus appealed to me for the same reasons as did Superman, the comic-strip hero. As I grew up I began to think of Christopher not as a generic hero but a special kind of hero, one of the maritime variety. What had push-pulled him across the ocean? I grew up in Yankee-Irish New England with some classmates speaking Italian as comfortably (or as uncomfortably) as they did English. I grew up with Hitler and Mao Tse-tung careening through the evening news broadcasts. I grew up with rockets vaulting the English Channel, then rockets on their way to the moon and Mars. Columbus stumbling on an unexpected continent seemed more suitable an object for my focus than even the all-powerful Clark Kent.

JFS: You noted that you were born and raised in the Boston area. Tell me about your childhood and early career.

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AWC: I know little about my father. I may have met his parents but if so, I was too young to remember the occasion. My mother's ancestry was mostly Irish, I think—a fact with which she was not entirely happy. Her father, who died when I was seven, was all Irish and I loved him without reservation. I wished and somehow still wish I was Irish-er. I grew up in the middle class in Wellesley, a rich suburb of Boston. My schooling was public until I entered Harvard.

My four years there as an undergraduate were the emptiest of my life. I was a commuter for whom Harvard was in total no more than a lecture hall at the end of a subway tunnel. We lived in Wellesley for my first year at Harvard, and then we started moving. We moved to five different towns in my four years. I had no contact with my contemporaries except on the weekends when I would take off on Saturday and Sunday mornings, and by hook or by crook I'd hitchhike or take a bus over to Wellesley where I'd play baseball or football with my old friends. At Harvard I was assigned to the commuter hall, which was in reality just a cafeteria. I'd sit around with total strangers and try to pick up a conversation, when there were much better commercial cafeterias off campus. I wish I had all that to do over again, because the opportunities available at a place like Harvard were so great.

The one Harvard faculty member with whom I made contact during my undergraduate years was Aaron Copland. I have been a lifelong jazz nut, and as a 17-year-old freshman I went to Copland during his office hours and held forth to him about jazz. He listened patiently and on one occasion asked me if I would like an ice cream cone, which I turned down in some confusion. In my own academic career, through my connections with Black History and American Studies, I have had repeatedly the opportunity to offer graduate seminars in the history of jazz at UT-Austin and the University of Helsinki.

As I graduated from Harvard, the Korean War commenced. I became a sergeant in the Army in the Panama Canal Zone—not a prize assignment, but better than being shot at. I did three years as a soldier during which I learned that there was something going on in the Americas. Latin America was Indian peoples to me before that. There was much more to the societies in which I lived than I had learned as an undergraduate. I tried to learn Spanish and failed to do so due to my own laziness. As a soldier in the Canal Zone, most people spoke to me in pretty good English. At the same time I convinced myself that I was a pretty good writer in English. I was capable of eloquence in English, but I was poor at other languages. I am not sure that makes any sense.

I spent the next few years trailing through to graduate degrees at Harvard School of Education and Boston University. At BU I earned a doctorate,

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which led to permanent employment teaching history, access to grants and fellowships, and appointments of various kinds to pursue my interests in various libraries and archives in North America, Europe, New Zealand, and elsewhere, and also to enough free time to write *The Columbian Exchange*.

In the early years of professorship I taught several courses in minority studies, proclaiming, I know, erudition from a deep pit of ignorance. I will claim justification in that I was teaching classes of white students who knew even less of the subject than I did. For the first time outside the Army, I benefited from direct contacts with American minorities. Living in Oakland in 1973, I earned a certificate of appreciation signed by Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown of the Black Panthers for my efforts on behalf of their campaigns in the Oakland city elections. After a great many years, I had it framed and hung it on the wall with various other certificates that have come my way. I taught in the Black Studies program at Washington State University along with Johnnetta Cole. Teaching Black Studies to black students, I probably learned more about myself and about my country. And as an unskilled laborer I helped build a health center alongside Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta of the United Farm Workers.

I learned from all these folks that the Fourth of July is better devoted to hope and dedication than to preening. By that time I had published a few articles in the area of the Columbian exchange and was able to get grants to carry out research at the University of California Medical School in San Francisco. I enjoyed San Francisco. I did not make any Berkeley contacts, though I did use the library there.

JFS: What was your dissertation?

AWC: My dissertation and first book were about American trade and diplomacy with Russia in the Napoleonic era. That subject may seem to you to be disconnected from the subjects to which I devoted the rest of my career, but I claim otherwise. This dissertation started me down the road away from simplistic political and narrowly nationalistic subjects. The protagonist of my first book was hemp rigging, a maritime necessity traded from the Ukraine to Boston. Somehow our sailors got their rope from Tsarist Russia. I had grown interested in influences across the oceans, between what was going on in Europe in relationship to what was going on in the American continents. If that is the sort of connection that fascinates you, you will inevitably thump up against Columbus.

JFS: What did you study after *The Columbian Exchange*?

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AWC: I swore (to my image in the bathroom mirror) that I would write only books about matters that were overlooked but of massive significance. That pledge led me from hemp to infectious disease, specifically to the 1918 influenza pandemic, often inappropriately called the Spanish flu. The 1918 flu killed more people than World War I, and then we—even most scientists—let it slip our minds. My book on the flu did not sweep the world, but I do take credit for directing the attention of a decent number of young scholars to enormous subjects on which there have been at least a half dozen good studies since.

A few historians of a philosophical bent of mind have become interested in the fact that things have happened to our species that were of enormous importance but which escaped our attention. It is perfectly obvious why we remember World War I, and perfectly justifiable. But the 1918 flu, simply stated in its statistics, was more important; yet for all practical purposes we forgot it for a couple or three generations. But I think it's more justified for us to bring our acquired wisdom, the lens of our wisdom, to bear on the search for the gale of changes which is sweeping over us now. . . . One wonders what's going on now to which we are paying little attention.

JFS: What were the beginnings of your book *Ecological Imperialism*?[1]

AWC: In that book I took *The Columbian Exchange* up another notch in scope and abstraction. Of course I was living through a period of increasing realization—particularly in Western Europe and its offspring like the United States—that there were changes sweeping over our human society that standard freshman-level course clichés, the rise of labor unions, for example, didn't help us much to understand. Being a historian with liberal arts agility, I veered back to the beginning of time and proceeded forward therefrom.

JFS: There has been debate about the terms 'ecological history' and 'environmental history,' yet you took the title *Ecological Imperialism*.

AWC: I like sweeping, even melodramatic titles, and the above are not gross enough for me. I recommend adding to our historiographical jargon a term favored by Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen to designate the modern period—the Anthropocene, that is, the last 100,000 years or so in which we *Homo sapiens* have advanced—though "stampeded" might be a more suitable verb—toward becoming our planet's key species. We have occupied or at least visited the entire land surface of the globe plus broad regions of ocean and atmosphere,

1. Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

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and we have mowed jungles, melted glaciers, and carried and deposited colossal garbage dumps alongside our temples and cathedrals. Our species has been one of the most powerful forces driving extinctions of other species, and has presided over the dispersal of, and even the development of, new species, especially of micro-life.

Americans with college degrees commonly know next to nothing about livestock. Why weren't there any horses in the New World in 1492? And what had happened to all the American elephants that had lived there not more than a miniscule few millennia before and now were all gone? Today's American horses and elephants are all descendants of post-Columbian Old World imports. It just might be that these phenomena are representative of global trends that are as significant as the industrial revolution.

I'm very interested, I realized recently, in Big History, like that written by David Christian.[2] I thought that I was already into big history, dealing with continental contacts, but this is even bigger, much bigger—Big History has had more influence on me than anything else written in the last ten or twenty years.

JFS: After *The Columbian Exchange* you wrote three books on somewhat related topics: *Children of the Sun,* about energy; *Measure of Reality,* about numbers and measurement; and *Throwing Fire,* about projectiles and warfare.[3] How did those three works evolve from your previous thoughts?

AWC: If I had an additional lifetime to live, I would write a multivolume history of the interaction of humanity and its effect on the evolution of all other life forms. But I doubt that I have that much time left, so I have produced the books cited above. These are interpretations of the influence of certain factors in the evolution, genetic as well as cultural, of my species in the last few millennia. *The Measure of Reality* is an essay on an essential intellectual characteristic of civilization: mathematics. I chat about its development from the Neolithic on, from nothing more complicated than counting our toenails to plotting trips to Mars. *Throwing Fire* is a brief study of the history of aerial weaponry. We can throw better than any other large creature because we have shoulders that enable us to throw overhand hard, accurately and far. After thus propelling

2. David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

3. Alfred W. Crosby, *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250–1600* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Throwing Fire: Projectile Technology through History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and *Children of the Sun: A History of Humanity's Unappeasable Appetite for Energy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

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stones and whatever else we could lift for many millennia, we invented bows and arrows and slings and catapults and such. Then we moved on to gunpowder, world wars, rockets, and Mars.

Children of the Sun is an essay on the general subject of our species and energy. We have learned how to corral and to designate purposes—targets, if you will—for applications of the energies we have commanded, all the way from controlling fire to our current partial and tentative domestication of atomic phenomena: fission, fusion, and all that. As a historian I am particularly impressed by how the full weight of a certain phrase in the American national anthem, written in the War of 1812, has altered in our time. The "rockets' red glare" might now refer to the "hydrogen bombs' red glare."

JFS: Did you imagine that *The Columbian Exchange* would have the impact it has over the last half century

AWC: No, I didn't, but then I am naturally modest.

JFS: The disciplinary structure of modern universities has not been conducive to your particular areas of research?

AWC: No, it hasn't. On the other hand, I haven't been treated as an alien from outer space either. Let me cite a couple of factors that may be pertinent. One, I have been an oddball intellectually, which means that I have not been positioned with easy access to the levers of power. If you begin with Russian hemp and then go on to Spanish flu, you can't expect that you will be leading legions of profs and grad students. Two, I lost years to family struggle rather than devoting them to scholarship. That era of pain and disorder closed with my marriage to Fran, a historian whom I married three decades ago, a galaxy-rocking event for which I thank whoever runs this place.

Because of Fran I spent two different years teaching American Studies at the University of Helsinki as a Fulbright professor. During those years I got to have a good look at Estonia (before and after it got loose from the USSR), Karelia, and Leningrad and Moscow during the Gorbachev period. Chernobyl blew up on the eve of our departure on a trip from Helsinki to Moscow. Once there, we discovered that nobody on the streets or at the Intourist office had any idea of what had happened.

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Since I learned even less Finnish than I had Spanish, it was astonishing to me and also to our Finnish friends when the Academy of Finland made me a member. We have a photo of President Ahtisaari shaking my hand. I look giddy while he looks pained. It's not something to frame and hang on the wall, so we keep it in a drawer to take out to show people now and then. The Academy gave me a mysterious medal with academicians on one side, naked women on the other, and my name and the date on the edge.

We also spent an academic year at the University of Hawaii-Manoa, with numbers of trips back in subsequent years. Combined with a Fulbright year I spent at the Turnbull Library in New Zealand doing research for *Ecological Imperialism*, the experience made me a great admirer of Pacific "neighbor islands." I loved visiting the backcountry and swimming off the beaches at dawn. I even have a goofy fondness for the tourist experience of Waikiki. And as in Finland, we made lasting friendships.

In January 2013 the American Historical Association presented me with an award for scholarly distinction, which I was unable to accept in person. I had stepped off a cliff into Parkinson's disease, which really screws up your frontal lobes. I'm 82 years old. I might turn out some good articles or a monograph with a Big History flavor, but I am certainly not going to write the 18-volume history of absolutely everything all at once. But nobody is looking for 18 volumes about anything.

My last three books are short books about very big topics. *Children of the Sun* is neither so ponderous nor so abstruse that any high school student should be put off by it. In fact, I intended it for high school students and undergrads, but the publisher never promoted it or priced it in that direction. It has been translated into Chinese (twice!) for both Taiwan and the mainland. I am big in China. But no American high school and, to my knowledge, no undergraduate course in any American university has adopted it, and now it is practically impossible to lay a hand on a copy.

In the meantime, ideas I discussed in *Throwing Fire*, *Children of the Sun*, *The Measure of Reality*, and my last public lecture at the University of London in 2010 are being given flashy multimedia treatment in the Big History Project aired on H2, spawn of the History Channel.[4] My God! If I were a high school student, I would be mesmerized. I myself am fascinated by these dynamic shows

4. This lecture, originally with the playful title "Big History as Prophylactic to Premature Interpretation. Example: Exchange the Columbian Exchange for the Anthropocene Exchange," has been translated into Spanish with the sedate title "Gran historia como historia ambiental" in *Relaciones: Estudios de Historia y Sociedad* [Colegio de Michoacán] 34:136 (2013), pp. 22– 39.

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with cameo historical reenactments, brilliant photography, and snazzy graphics. Books just don't do all that. The Big History Project is a spin-off of a TED talk by David Christian on "The History of Our World in 18 Minutes." That's 18 minutes instead of 18 volumes! I think it all goes back to Al Gore's feature-length fancy PowerPoint show *An Inconvenient Truth.*

If multimedia is the means to imbue the coming generations with awe, responsibility, and inspiration, then all power to the designers. Still, I hope one day some of our grandchildren will repair to a chair in a quiet place with a book or two.

It's difficult if your interests run from the Paleolithic to the present, from Asia to Latin America to Europe and Australia, because there are no intellectual cubbyholes to sit in. And it's particularly difficult when you are surrounded by people who have ordered their lives to such things as the New Deal. You say "Paleolithic" to them, they turn white and run out of the room.

JFS: You also pointed out that it is an issue of focus. Whereas a person studying Mark Twain or the New Deal is digging very deeply in a constrained area, your type of research is very broad. Thus it's hard to have a conversation between the two.

AWC: Exactly, thank you. I don't make converts at colleges and universities as a matter of having useful and enriching glasses of beer on Friday afternoons with whoever shows up. Frankly, I needed to be more socially (and maybe intellectually) adept and agile. The University of Texas does not have much grease in the joints. I turned out some books, but I couldn't turn out the books and at the same time be sweet and loving with figures in the sciences, as well as with the Mark Twainers.

JFS: Did your military service in the Panama Canal Zone influence your thinking about the transformation of the local area by Europeans?

AWC: My time in the Army was very helpful for me. Walking around rubbing elbows with people from Harlem, Seattle, and the Bronx, and all over in the Canal Zone was educational. There is this great technological achievement of Western civilization, this canal across the middle of the continents. That enormous achievement was staffed by people most of whom could not really read English. They certainly were not in there studying Galileo and advanced physics. The Canal was in many ways an outgrowth of international ideological competition. There were minor mountains split open so we could run an alley through them, in this case a canal. The Canal is amazing. It has made

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an enormous difference to people all over the world, certainly—positively speaking—more for them than for the people of Panama. In fact, if I ever went back to do the research, I'm quite sure I'd find out that most of the people who were able to profit one way or another from the Canal Zone were not Panamanians but professionals, like engineers from MIT, and all sorts of workers brought in from the Caribbean islands.

JFS: If serving in the Panama Canal Zone helped you move into environmental history, do you think environmental history will help you to continue to focus on the big questions?

AWC: It is bound to, because so many environmental issues are tied up with crises that involve legislation, failure of government regulations this way or that, and failure of big business. We go both ways at once. From back in the eighteenth century forward to the present there has been research into the nature of matter and energy that simultaneously takes us off into more and more abstruse reasoning on the one hand and to making really great bombs on the other. The temptations of energy lead you everywhere.

To conclude, I probably have always been interested in Big History. It just took David Christian's book to give me a name for it.

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