

## **IN MEMORIAM**

### **ALFRED W. CROSBY JR.**

Alfred Worcester Crosby Jr., Professor Emeritus of American Studies, Geography, and History, died on March 14, 2018, at the age of eighty-seven, owing to complications from Parkinson's disease. He had lived on Nantucket Island, Massachusetts since retiring from UT Austin 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 himself preferred a broader term, “ecological history,” to refer to the field he helped found, and he defined it as “the history of all organisms pertinent to human history and their (our) environment.” He was also a pioneer of world history, or what is now sometimes referred to as “Big History.”

Al was born in Boston, Massachusetts on January 15, 1931, to Alfred Worcester Crosby and Ruth Frances (Coleman) Crosby. His middle-class family lived in Wellesley, Massachusetts where Al graduated from high school. He entered Harvard College in 1948. In an interview he recalled the experience of being a commuter student as “a lecture hall at the end of a subway tunnel,” and regretted not taking full advantage of Harvard’s opportunities. He did seek out composer Aaron Copeland during office hours “and held forth to him about jazz,” a lifelong enthusiasm. Crosby majored in modern European history, graduated in 1952, and then entered the U.S. Army. Being stationed in the Panama Canal Zone led him to a key realization that “there was something going on in the Americas.” 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 sixteen-lecture "colloquy" on the subject at an off-campus center for political activism. When the course was officially added to the university catalog, Al taught it for two years. He described teaching "from the depths of my ignorance" for "white students who knew less than I did." Johnnetta Betsch Cole, a co-founder of WSU's Black Studies program and later president of Spelman College, recalled Al, "the Irish White guy from Boston," as her "brother in the struggle for social justice." In May 1970, as 800 students occupied the university's administration building to demand release from classes to attend a day-long teach-in protesting the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, Al was one of three radical faculty leaders who addressed them through a bullhorn. He later traveled with thirty-six students to Delano, California to assist in building a health center for Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers' Union and volunteered for the Black Panther Party's political campaign during Oakland city elections. Former student Molly Martin praised him as "the rare professor who bridged the generation gap and communed with us students." But Al's radicalism was tempered by pessimism. Nearly a year after the student strike, the campus newspaper quoted him: "A lot of people feel a hopelessness about working through the system and they don't think going to the streets will work anymore either so they're dropping out and staying high until doomsday."

Regarding his early career, Al told an interviewer, “I tell you, 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. In the preface he stated his concern “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 the 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 on it. In contrast, reviewers universally praised the book as innovative. A review in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* described him 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 at Washington State, he published his third book, *Epidemic and Peace, 1918*, a history of the influenza pandemic partially researched during a two-year fellowship at the University of California at 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. When the book was

reprinted, a publisher retitled it *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*, the title by which it is now most often known.

Al arrived at UT Austin in September 1977 as Visiting Associate Professor of American Studies and History, having been recruited to provide American Studies with expertise in comparative studies. He had just completed a year as a 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 UT Austin, had praised *The Columbian Exchange* as a "pioneer work" with "exciting new perspectives on nearly every field of history." In 1979, after a second year as a visitor in American Studies and Geography, Crosby was appointed Professor of American Studies and Geography (the latter was a courtesy appointment; later Al also 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 also encompassed U.S. ecological history, history of science, popular writing about science, and the history of jazz (the latter a graduate seminar). Most of his courses were cross-listed in Geography or History, depending on the topic.

For nearly a decade, UT Austin students in Al's classes at all levels witnessed him working out the themes and contents of his next major book, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. With this project Crosby stepped even further back from standard historical topics than he had with *The Columbian Exchange*. He sought to understand how colonizing Europeans had easily 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 post-colonial 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 reviewer William Cronon to declare it Crosby's "most impressive contribution to date — tightly argued, beautifully written and quietly daring in its historical vision." Even so, Cronon correctly pointed out the danger of paying "more attention to the *biologies* of human populations than...to their *cultures*"—that is, "the risk of becoming overly determinate." As one of Al's colleagues pointed out, if one had absorbed the full significance of *Ecological Imperialism*, ordinary human events of the sort treated by most historians could seem like mere epiphenomena.

*Ecological Imperialism* became an instant classic. To date, Google Scholar records 4,449 citations, compared with 2,775 for *The Columbian Exchange* and some 2,500 for Al's other six books. *Ecological Imperialism* was awarded the Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize by the Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1988. It also must have influenced the committee that awarded Crosby a Guggenheim Fellowship for 1987-88 to begin researching the book that occupied much of the remainder of his time at UT Austin: *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250-1600* (1997). In a sense, *The Measure of Reality* served as the flipside to *Ecological Imperialism*, looking into 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. Al was not afraid to complicate and even somewhat undermine his own positions.

*Ecological Imperialism* brought invitations to speak from around the world. Between the time of its publication and 2010, when Al gave his final public lecture at the University of London, he presented more than sixty 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 (1985-86 and 1997-98), sharing the latter appointment with his spouse Frances Karttunen. During academic year 1991-92, Crosby was a visiting professor of world history at the University of Hawaii, and in 1999 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 thirty non-Finns so honored in the past fifty 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), by the World History Association as one of its Pioneers (2009), and by the American Historical Association with its Award for Scholarly Distinction (2013).

Through all the acclaim, Al stayed focused on research and writing, while remaining amused by the follies of everyday life and bemused by ironies of academic politics. Colleagues in American Studies learned that Al marched to a different drummer. He took seriously the few departmental administrative posts that came his way, but he brought to them the iconoclastic spirit of his tenure at Washington State. During a brief period as acting director of American Studies, for example, 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, even in a

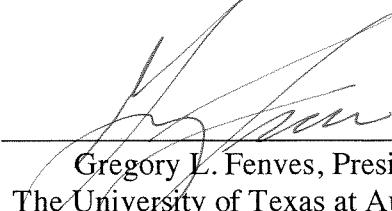
profession noted for idiosyncrasy. To an interviewer he admitted being “an oddball intellectually.” Although colleagues did not actually treat him “as an alien from outer space,” his career choices had not “positioned” him “with easy access to the levers of power.” He claimed that while writing about 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 that seemed more appropriate to a union hall than a faculty lounge.

As one might have predicted, Al did not let up after retiring from UT Austin, 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 of these 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 intentionally written at a high school level in order to reach the widest possible audience. Like Al’s more influential projects, these books displayed a wide multidisciplinary scope and demonstrated his ability to look from the outside, to synthesize arrays of seemingly unrelated data, to define key transformational moments in areas of history in which he was not an expert, and above all to project conclusions so clear and obvious that one wonders how everyone had missed them.

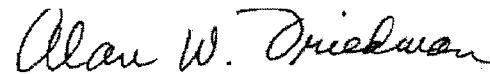
Al was politically active throughout his life. In Austin he protested against nuclear armament and participated annually in the Martin Luther King birthday march. He voiced his opposition to the invasion of Iraq by demonstrating weekly in front of the Nantucket post office, where he and others would read the names of American troops who had died in combat. Al was

also an avid birdwatcher—not a political statement, but an avocation that demonstrated that 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 thirty-five 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.



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Gregory L. Fenves, President  
The University of Texas at Austin



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Alan W. Friedman

Alan W. Friedman, Secretary  
The General Faculty

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Jeffrey L. Meikle (Chair) and Mark C. Smith.