

*Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900.* By Alfred W. Crosby. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986. 368pp. UK price: £27.50 hardback, £9.95 paperback.

SOME YEARS ago, I attended an international meeting in Mexico on historical demography. A distinguished European argued that European expansion had not *per se* produced great loss of life. Needless to say, Latin Americans present leapt from their seats and launched bitter rebuttals and corrections, starting with Cortés's decimation of the Aztec population in the very location where we were meeting. If that European is still in doubt, one can only hope that he reads Crosby's superb book. It is well written, well presented (with long and bold print for those of us whose eyes are 'maturing', as my optician calls it) and, above all, is well argued. It is fascinating in its details, and yet consuming in its broad sweep. It is intelligent, yet is racy bedside reading.

The central thesis is that European expansion, particularly the creation of what Crosby calls 'Neo-Europe' (European societies overseas in Anglo-America, Australasia, and Latin America), was achieved successfully because the plants, animals, and pathogens (in that order, although sometimes together) carried along by European voyagers and colonists triumphed over indigenous fauna, flora, and people. He is a biological determinist, and more specifically a zoological determinist. After spelling out the effect of 'weeds', he then moves on to 'animals' and tells us (p.173): 'the advantage over the indigenous of their overseas colonies was not so much a matter of crop plants as of domesticated animals'. And later (p.274), he specifies this even more: 'the New World's native biota in historical times has been inferior to that of the Old World in large quadrupeds. Americans, however, can reinflate their egos by pointing with scorn to the biotas of Australia and New Zealand, which are inferior in quadrupeds even to that of America.'

In his chapter termed 'Explanations', he puts forward an argument of particular interest to New Zealanders. He draws on the theory of 'the Scientist — Paul S. Martin' to provide an explanation for much about the Neo-Europes that is otherwise obscure. And it places the Amerindians, Aborigines, and Maori, on the one hand, and the European invaders, on the other, in a fresh and intellectually provocative relationship — not simply as adversaries with the indigenes passive, the white active, but as 'two waves of invaders of the same species, the first acting as the shock troops clearing the way for the second wave. . .' (p.280).

Part of the particular appeal of this book is its use of New Zealand as a case study. Again the argument is well written and supported, so much so that the reader is forced to admire the author's use of sources and bibliographic research. New Zealand's significance is that its ecology is 'a palimpsest written on by only a few people[s] . . . [but] is the briefest and most fully documented . . . Europeans came to New Zealand so late that they made their first and most important additions to its biota while under the perceptive scrutiny of scientists . . . of the generations of Cuvier and Darwin' (p.218).

In a book of this scope there are bound to be minor issues about which each and every reviewer can quibble. My particular complaints may be demographic: for example, the perpetuation of the Victorian confusion between childlessness (due to infant and childhood mortality) and 'barrenness' (meaning childlessness or true sterility, the inability to conceive), and the notion that female infanticide was widespread. But to pursue these arguments would be to trivialize and to fail to bring to the attention of readers the cardinal virtue of this study: it is 'intellectually provocative' — to use the author's own phrase — and broad sweeping. And it is also a joy to read.

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