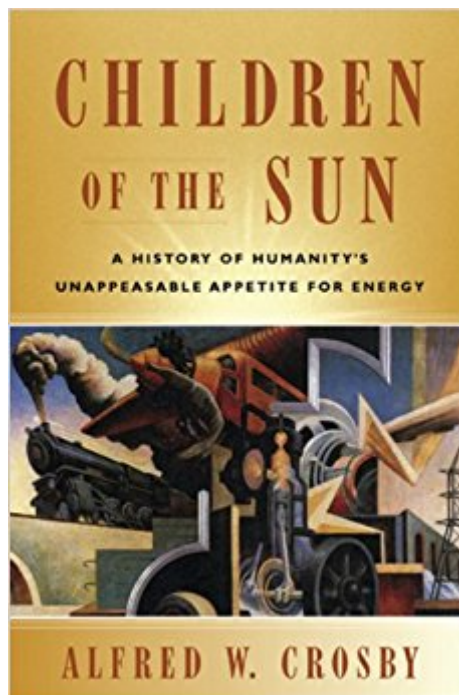




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# Children Of The Sun: A History Of Humanity's Unappeasable Appetite For Energy



## Synopsis

We don't often recognize the humble activity of cooking for the revolutionary cultural adaptation that it is. But when the hearth fires started burning in the Paleolithic, humankind broadened the exploitation of food and took one of several great leaps forward. All life on earth is dependent on energy from the sun, but one species has evolved to be especially efficient in tapping that supply. This is the story of the human species and its dedicated effort to sustain and elevate itself by making the earth's stores of energy its own. A story of slow evolutionary change and sharp revolutionary departures, it takes readers from the origins of the species to our current fork in the road. With a winning blend of wit and insight, Alfred W. Crosby reveals the fundamental ways in which humans have transformed the world and themselves in their quest for energy. When they first started, humans found fuel much like other species in the simple harvesting of wild plants and animals. A major turn in the human career came with the domestication of fire, an unprecedented achievement unique to the species. The greatest advantage from this breakthrough came in its application to food. Cooking vastly increased the store of organic matter our ancestors could tap as food, and the range of places they could live. As they spread over the earth, humans became more complicated harvesters, negotiating alliances with several other species—plant and animal—leading to the birth of agriculture and civilizations. For millennia these civilizations tapped sun energy through the burning of recently living biomass—wood, for instance. But humans again took a revolutionary turn in the last two centuries with the systematic burning of fossilized biomass. Fossil fuels have powered our industrial civilization and in turn multiplied our demand for sun energy. Here we are then, on the verge of exceeding what the available sources of sun energy can conventionally afford us, and suffering the ill effects of our seemingly insatiable energy appetite. A founder of the field of global history, Crosby gives a book that glows with illuminating power.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ever since cultivating fire, the human species has depended on tapping new sources of energy for survival, writes global historian Crosby (*Germes, Seeds, and Animals: Studies in Ecological History*). This enjoyable, humorously anecdotal study provides a succinct overview of our voracious "appetite for energy," most particularly the inventive (and indiscriminate) exploitation of sunshine in its fossilized forms—peat, coal, oil and natural gas. The hunter-gatherers of the Paleolithic era depended on muscle power to move through their world, and not much changed, Crosby notes, until the advent of the Industrial Revolution, when the first steam-powered engine was invented in 1712 by ironmonger Thomas Newcomen (James Watt, Crosby says, merely improved on Newcomen's design). Advances in harnessing energy trapped in organic matter followed quickly: whale oil used for lighting was supplanted by coal gas, kerosene distilled from petroleum and finally Thomas Edison's light bulb—itself powered by the electricity generated from coal and oil. This history explores how an ingenious and adaptable humankind found ever more efficient ways to harness "concentrated sun energy." Crosby is optimistic about the Earth's future—with the caveat that that future could be bleak without another energy breakthrough. B&w illus. (Jan.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The last shall be first: Crosby concludes that civilization has maximized its exploitation of solar energy (whether in renewable or fossilized form) and will have to go nuclear if its energy desires are to be satiated. Tracing the historical route to this impasse, the author's trim tome has a droll tone that should make it considerably more appealing than the current torrent of grimmer, longer, and agenda-driven books on this subject. A veteran ecological historian, Crosby structures his story by the landmarks of energy technology--fire, the dynamo, the internal-combustion engine. And he emphasizes the indolent element of human nature: we like to get more work done with less effort. Surprisingly, cooking starts off Crosby's survey: it eased digestion, increased edibles, and probably helped induce the domestication of animals. These labor savers, Crosby illustrates in anecdotal

style, reigned as the muscle-power maximum of energy production until Thomas Newcomen's 1712 steam engine ignited the Industrial Revolution. An entertaining history of the energy conundrum. Gilbert Taylor Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Some of us have read Alfred Crosby's earlier books *The Columbian Exchange* and *Measure of Reality*, these fit with *Children of the Sun* and its story of our use of energy. The European explorers' great success in the Americas 500 years ago as explained in the *Columbian exchange* was exporting deadly germs that decimated American native life and importing life supporting potatoes and corn. An example of some *Children of the Sun* getting ahead exploiting opportunities created by germs and plants. Crosby discusses an easily overlooked energy accomplishment, cooking. We are so accustomed to cooking it takes a Crosby to remind us how cooking dwarfs more recent energy accomplishments our cousins, apes and monkeys lack fire, can't cook and so need huge guts and enormous teeth to chew and digest what we cook. Crosby surprised me by mentioning as an energy accomplishment our long time partnership with dogs. Dogs guard at night allowing us to rest and they also help hunt. Crosby allows that they, like our horses, chose us as much as we them. Not all animals are like this think of Hyenas and Rhinos. Horses help plow (with our harnesses) and carry. After discussing agriculture as energy harvesting as well as early work with water wheels and windmills, Crosby moves to mechanization and England. England's coal and her culture were suitable for industrialization. A landscape as perfect for the appearance of the steam engine as had been the Indus valley with its climate, water and grain for civilization and settlements thousands of years earlier. Savery, Newcomen and Watt were all English. These creators of engines were rooted in coal and trellised on already busy machine shops that could build valves and tight fitting pistons. If agriculture needs sun, soil, and water the steam engine needed coal, machine shops, tinkers, and adventures backed by capital. The exact ingredients for "progress" will be disputed. Some say "never again" while most wish to sustain these conditions. Crosby goes on to discuss achievements of modernity which may be confused with science. What are we to make of oil, coal nuclear fission? What are the prospects for fusion? Are we happy to have the A-bomb, the H-bomb? Certainly we are delighted with electricity. *Children of the Sun* in 2002 could hardly have predicted what would soon follow, one of man's greatest accomplishments the inexpensive PV panel. These may as well transform mere dreams into solid gold as they silently, and

motionlessly transform sunlight to electricity. I anticipated Crosby examining energy retreats as well as advances, but in vain. We may have to wait another generation for this discussion. Why do we give up traditional simple good uses of the sun as fast as we develop new? Why take down the superior clothesline and ask our tired, overworked electric help to do what a clothes line does better? Why leave electric lights on in the day? Perhaps we are not Children of the Sun but have a different heritage involving electricity. These questions, which Crosby doesn't consider, can be anticipated by noticing Crosby is a carrier not an explainer of this solar betrayal. In *Measure of Reality* Crosby's study of modern technologies roots 1250-1600 he dwells on the mechanical clock forgetting sundials as blithely as a contemporary who forgets to turn the lights off.

A great introduction to the history of energy consumption.

Got this and MANY books for my high school son for required reading list for AP exams...he really enjoyed it!

Good book

Required reading, so it was ok.

As a short (167pp) and enjoyable history of the place of energy through human history, I can recommend *Children of the Sun*, by Alfred w. Crosby. This chronological survey of the subject -- spanning from the introduction of fire (at the time when yoga tights were made from mammoth fur) through the various fossil fuels and uses and ending with nuclear - is told with clear prose and is liberally sprinkled with enlightening and entertaining (or humourously disturbing) historical anecdotes, references to names we've heard and trivia. A couple of examples: 1. to amuse Louis XV, "Jean-Antoine Nollet... arranged 180 gendarmes in a circle holding hands and had one of them touch the brass ball in the lid of the charged Leyden jar [early battery]. The shock ran through all 180 instantly and they jumped and gasped in perfect Unison. The King loved it." 2. "The Chicago World's Fair, better known as the Columbian Exposition [ 400th anniversary of Columbus arriving in the Americas] or the White City, was officially opened at a locale a few miles from downtown on May 1, 1893 . (a year late, you may notice, but major demonstrations of a civilizations prowess aren't thrown together in a day.) 3. [ regarding the first ever execution by electricity] The current was turned

off; doctors are examined Kemmler and pronounced him dead. One of the witnesses, Dr. Alfred W. Southwick, an advocate of electrocution as a merciful means of execution, declared: "there is the culmination of ten years work and study. We live in a higher civilization from this day." But Kemmler's chest still rose and fell: he seemed to be breathing. The switch was thrown again. Kemmler when rigid again. For an instant there was a blue flame at his neck. His clothes caught fire. There is a very strong smell of burning meat. Now there was no question as to his death."The book is far from a comprehensive or fully critical look at the issues concerning the various choices that were made and remain to be made regarding our energy use and how we source it. It does not try to be that. Instead, you have a quick and informative outline of the tremendously important role that energy has played in the evolution of human civilization. If there is one real lack, it is the short shrift given to renewable energy which is not even worthy of mention in the table of contents while both 'fission' and 'fusion' are. Look for this book, then, as being more informative of the energy happenings prior to mid-20th Century. However, on the subject of nuclear, while the author does a creditable job of trying to be objective in presenting many points-of-view, he nonetheless is clear in his belief that nuclear is the best way to achieve needed quantities of energy (and his support for the billions needed for continued fusion research). He gives considerable space (21pp) to a discussion of fission's history and includes thought-provoking nuggets, such as: "a pound of uranium can produce as much heat as 2.5 million pounds of coal.". He does remain circumspect, however: "...we are also required to assess what our species will do to the biosphere and to itself if its energy greed is not satisfied with nuclear power." (p144) The author falls victim, however, to wishful thinking: "surely we can bury radioactive waste so deep that they will not endanger us or our descendants." He also shares, in my opinion, a too-commonly-held view of 'technology-as-saviour.': "And perhaps our physicists will turn another of their glorious tricks and successfully domesticate hydrogen fusion to initiate a golden age." (p164) Were that energy was the sole challenge we face. But, at least the impending hordes of fleeing environmental refugees may have bountiful electricity to light their way. Too bad you can't eat it.

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