

A First Handbook of the Roots of English by Norman Bird

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The winner of the 1994 American Spelling Bee competition won the coveted trophy on the word *antediluvian*. This does not at first appear to be a difficult word, however to spell it correctly the winner had to know that the *ante* here means 'before' (as in *ante meridiem*) rather than 'against' (as in *antithesis*). The former is an Italic root while the latter is Hellenic (Greek). According to Bird's introduction to his *First Handbook of the Roots of English* a clear understanding of the origins of words may lead to better spelling.

The *Handbook* organises the most frequent words in English into six separate sections: Germanic, Italic, Hellenic, Celtic, Other Indo-European and Non-Indo European. Each section has a brief introduction explaining how words from the different languages made their way into English and what proportion of present-day English they constitute (e.g. 40% of the most frequent words are of Germanic origin). Thus, the *Handbook*, may function as a useful aid to organising and increasing one's knowledge of word derivations.

As indicated in the title, this is the *First Handbook of the Roots of English*, and as such it is both unique and experimental with all the attendant advantages and disadvantages this implies. It is the first book in English, for example, to be organised along the lines of an Arabic dictionary, i.e. in alphabetical order of roots. However, the author never actually defines the term "root" as used in the *Handbook*. Likewise, there is an extremely useful index of roots which gives an example of each Germanic, Italic, Hellenic and Celtic root occurring in an English word and deriving from the same original Indo-European root. Though it is fascinating to see what these roots have in common (e.g. how do we derive *teach*, *dictionary* and *desk* from the same root?), the impact of the index is lost as the columns are not given clear headings which means the reader must either remember the order of the languages or constantly refer to the explanation which precedes the index. The above weaknesses notwithstanding, the *Handbook* may prove a useful resource for teachers grading and producing vocabulary teaching materials, as in addition to the origin, the approximate frequency of each root is also indicated.

This is not the sort of book that you will want to read from cover to cover, but is a reference you can dip into with delight over the years.