Introduction

Stories like ‘Hansel and Gretel’, ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, ‘Cinderella’ and ‘Snow White’ are all found in the Grimms’ collection, although they aren’t all originally German. Quite a number had been written down by Charles Perrault, a French author, at the end of the 18th century. The English versions come from a variety of sources: in Hansel and Gretel or Rumpelstilzchen, for example, the character names reveal a German origin, whereas in Cinderella – a character who appears in folktales from around the globe – the name suggests that the English version has come via the Italian Cenerentola, not the German Aschenputtel.

Fairy-stories and folktales are of very ancient origin, and the Grimm brothers were interested in them because they wanted to explore the roots of European and German culture. Their writing for children was only a very small part of what they did: both Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859) were trained lawyers who worked as administrators, librarians and academics. They spent most of their careers exploring German medieval texts and examining the roots of the German language and the connections between languages and cultures. In Germany they are best-known for their fairy-stories, but also for founding the great German dictionary which is still named after them.

Grimms’ Dictionary, officially the Deutsches Wörterbuch, in 32 volumes, is the German national dictionary and equivalent of the Oxford English Dictionary for English. The first volumes – the Grimms only got to the letter F before they died – are written in a very individual style, uncharacteristic of a dictionary. You could look at the entry for the letter A online at: http://woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB/

You will see that the Grimms don’t just stick to a cold, factual style – they call A ‘the noblest of all sounds’, for example! They had some strong opinions about how German should be used – for example, they thought capital letters should only be used for proper names, and not otherwise. They were very interested in pan-European culture and sharing of ideas, so they didn’t write the dictionary in the Gothic script which was normal at that time: they wanted to use the same alphabet style as other Europeans. The dictionary contains many words which the Grimms picked up from folk-tales and from exploring obscure and old-fashioned names for things, in which they took great delight.

The Grimms were important thinkers of the early 19th century and formed part of the movement called European Romanticism. This was a reaction against the 18th-century Enlightenment, a cultural movement sometimes called the ‘Age of Reason’, whose adherents rejected ideas based on traditions and what they saw as superstition and instead promoted rational thinking and science. In Romanticism, on the other hand, writers and artists rejected the reliance on cold, logical rationality and explored emotions and intuitions, seeing value in people’s lives and experiences and in their encounters with the natural world. Romantics like the Grimms wanted to explore the development of the German people through their language and stories, and they regarded the Middle Ages as a golden age for literary and artistic achievement. The Grimms and others were also reacting against the Industrial Revolution, with its factories and urban sprawl, and looking back to an idealized rural past, which fuelled their interest in local dialects. There was a fear that dialects were
being lost as the population became more concentrated in cities, and so the Grimms and their circle were eager to preserve what they could of the earlier German cultural and linguistic landscape.

Another important strand in German thinking which influenced the Grimms were early nationalists like Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) and Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814). At the time when the Grimms were working on their fairy-stories parts of Germany had been conquered by the French under Napoleon: Jacob Grimm’s first job was as librarian to Jérôme Bonaparte, who had been created King of Westphalia (1807–1813), with his court at Kassel. The old Holy Roman Empire, which had been a union of mainly German-speaking countries, had come to an end in 1806, and it was succeeded by another confederation of German-speaking states. The Grimms, like other patriotic Romantics of their time, wished for Germany to be a single country. They hoped that their research into the history of the German language and culture would contribute to bringing this about, and they participated in German political life as parliamentarians as well as through their writings. However, both brothers died before German Unification was achieved in 1871.