

The Grimm brothers

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were the oldest in a family of five brothers and one sister. Their father, Philipp Wilhelm, a lawyer, was town clerk in Hanau and later justiciary in Steinau, another small Hessian town, where his father and grandfather had been ministers of the Calvinistic Reformed Church. The father's death in 1796 brought social hardships to the family; the death of the mother in 1808 left 23-year-old Jacob with the responsibility of four brothers and one sister. Jacob, a scholarly type, was small and slender with sharply cut features, while Wilhelm was taller, had a softer face, and was sociable and fond of all the arts.

After attending the high school in Kassel the brothers followed their father's footsteps and studied law at the University of Marburg (1802–06) with the intention of entering civil service. At Marburg they came under the influence of Clemens Brentano, who awakened in both a love of folk poetry, and Friedrich Karl von Savigny, cofounder of the historical school of jurisprudence, who taught them a method of antiquarian investigation that formed the real basis of all their later work. Others, too, strongly influenced the Grimms, particularly the philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder with his ideas on folk poetry. Essentially, they remained individuals, creating their work according to their own principles.

In 1805 Jacob accompanied Savigny to Paris to do research on legal manuscripts of the Middle Ages; the following year he became secretary to the war office in Kassel. Because of his health, Wilhelm remained without regular employment until 1814. After the French entered in 1806, Jacob became private librarian to King Jerome of Westfalia in 1808 and a year later *auditeur* of the Conseil d'État but returned to Hessian service in 1813 after Napoléon's defeat. As secretary to the legation, he went twice to Paris (1814–15), to recover precious books and paintings taken by the French from Hesse and Prussia. He also took part in the Congress of Vienna (September 1814–June 1815). Meantime, Wilhelm had become secretary at the Elector's library in Kassel (1814), and Jacob joined him there in 1816.

By that time the brothers had definitely given up thoughts of a legal career in favour of purely literary research. In the years to follow they lived frugally and worked steadily, laying the foundations for their lifelong interests. Their whole thinking was rooted in the social and political changes of their time and the challenge these changes held. Jacob and Wilhelm had nothing in common with the fashionable "Gothic" Romanticism of the 18th and 19th centuries. Their state of mind made them more Realists than Romantics. They investigated the distant past and saw in antiquity the foundation of all social institutions of their days. But their efforts to preserve these foundations did not mean that they wanted to return to the past. From the beginning, the Grimms sought to include material from beyond their own frontiers—from the literary traditions of Scandinavia, Spain, the Netherlands, Ireland, Scotland, England, Serbia, and Finland.