At a time when the worldwide bicentenary celebrations of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* are once again highlighting the names of the Brothers Grimm, it may be appropriate to remember the role they have played in Irish-German literary relations. Due to their activities 1826 was an important year in the history of the cultural exchange between the two countries. On 12 January, the *Göttingischen Gelehrten Anzeigen*, a highly respected academic journal, published Wilhelm Grimm’s review of a book that had appeared anonymously in London only a few months before. It was called *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* and had been compiled by a young Irishman, Thomas Crofton Croker from Cork. In the review, Grimm praised both the apparent authenticity and the literary skills of the author: “Der ungenannte Verfasser hat die Überlieferungen an Ort und Stelle mit sichtbarer Treue erfasst und auf die Darstellung nicht gewöhnliche Sorgfalt verwendet; es sind kleine wohlgearbeitete Bilder, auf welchen auch die Beiwerke mit Fleiss ausgemalt sind” [“The unnamed author has collected the tales on the ground with visible faithfulness and has taken unusual care in describing them; they are small, well-crafted images, the details of which have been diligently portrayed”]¹ (Grimm, 1882: 371). Still in the same year, Friedrich Fleischer in Leipzig published a translation of the book for which Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm figured as joint authors, although it seems that it was Wilhelm who was primarily responsible. On 16 June 1826, Croker in a grateful if somewhat obsequious letter to Wilhelm Grimm made himself known as the author, to which Grimm replied almost immediately (on 29 July), stating that he was already familiar with Croker’s *Researches in the South of Ireland* of 1824. This led to further correspondence and put Ireland on the map in Germany as a storehouse of living folk traditions.

Few Irish writers before Croker had reached similar recognition in Germany. The most influential among them was undoubtedly Jonathan Swift,

---

¹ All translations in this chapter are by the editors.
whose popularity began with the anonymous translation of *Gulliver’s Travels* into German only two years after the book’s first London printing and has lasted until the present day. On the popular literary scene, Swift’s book has produced a spate of children’s versions, not all of them a credit to the translators and/or editors, while in the academic field the prestigious Centre for Swift Studies at the University of Münster – which boasts a complete replica of Swift’s personal library, publishes the international journal *Swift Studies* and organises annual conferences exclusively devoted to the life and writings of Swift – is a prominent example of the impact the Dean has had on German culture.

The question of trans-national popularity versus real impact or influence, thoroughly discussed in Patrick O’Neill’s admirable study *Ireland and Germany*, is of course far too complex an issue to be developed in the present context, but in order to contextualise Croker’s position in Germany, a few other Irish writers may be mentioned briefly who, in one way or another, became known beyond the confines of specialist studies.

Among Croker’s near-contemporaries, Lady Morgan (née Owenson), of *Wild Irish Girl* fame in fiction, and Thomas Moore, with his *Irish Melodies* in poetry, were the Irish writers who found the greatest following among German readers. Together with Croker, they were largely responsible for the creation of a romantic image of Ireland that was, of course, far removed from the harsh realities of social life but persisted long after the authors’ literary reputation had faded away. Even the novels of Charles Lever, although highly popular in Germany, failed to modify this image. Around the turn of the century, the comedies of Oscar Wilde were widely popular on the German stage, but coming as they did from London, Wilde was often seen as an *English* writer, a national fallacy that even Bernard Shaw could not wholly escape. Shaw was one of the strongest foreign influences on intellectual life in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century, initially through his plays and later through his image as a ‘sage’ whose every pronouncement, however facetious, was taken seriously. His death in 1950 was top news in the German media and shocked even the young, as the present writer can affirm.

Among other Irish writers, James Joyce has received what is probably more than a fair share of contributions from Germany to the academic ‘Joyce industry’, but the influence of *Ulysses* on modern and post-modern German fiction was undoubtedly greater than that of any other individual work. In more recent years the ‘Beckett industry’ has reached similar proportions, while again the impact of a single work, *Waiting for Godot*, was felt far
beyond the realm of academe. W. B. Yeats, on the other hand, has never obtained the same degree of popularity that he enjoys in other countries, partly because his work was overshadowed by a number of German poets from the same period, especially Stefan George and Rainer Maria Rilke, but also because of the unfortunate transfer of the translation rights to an author (Herbert E. Herlitschka) who subsequently did very little to promote Yeats’s status in Germany, publishing too few translations, and these not always in the stylistic quality that Yeats requires (Kosok, 1989). A special case is that of Sean O’Casey who in the 1960s and 1970s, after a delay caused by the War and its aftermath, became one of the most frequently produced foreign playwrights in both German states, East and West, and who has probably seen more professional stage productions in Germany than in Ireland, the UK and the US taken together, as Peter Stapelberg (1979) has shown in an excellent reception study.

In the second half of the twentieth century, nearly all major writers from Ireland found a hearing in Germany, supported by the well-established translation culture in this country. A special impact of the Irish literary scene on Germany was felt in 1996 when Ireland had been chosen as that year’s special partner country for the annual Frankfurt Book Fair. The Fair, with its 8,000 exhibitors the largest in the world, was opened by President Robinson who came accompanied by a covey of contemporary Irish writers and critics, ranging from Edna Longley to Edna O’Brien, from Anthony Cronin to Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and from John Banville to Ulick O’Connor, each of whom gave well-attended readings of their work, while Seamus Heaney delivered the opening lecture. Subsequently, Irish literature for a while became a major subject in the press and on radio and TV (Kosok, 1998: 30–32).

The one contemporary Irish writer who, regrettably, has not received the attention he undoubtedly deserves, is the dramatist Brian Friel. Apart from a few isolated productions of his plays, the German theatre, still obsessed with the excesses of the ‘director’s (as opposed to the author’s) theatre’ with its disregard of the dramatist as the centre pole of its activities, has turned a cold shoulder on his plays. On the other hand, the German literary scene has given an enthusiastic welcome to short fiction from Ireland. Stimulated by the dedicated work of a few translators (among whom Elisabeth Schnack, who published more than fifty volumes of Irish fiction in translation, is the outstanding example), the Irish short-story maintains a prominent position in the reading preferences of the wider German public, and the image of Ireland in Germany has, for better or worse, been largely shaped by such
writers as Frank O’Connor, Mary Lavin, Sean O’Faolain and their contemporaries and successors.

Irish readers may find it unfortunate to see the name of J. C. Croker mentioned in this context, on a par with celebrities like Swift, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett, because his reputation in Ireland, which had never been particularly high, has suffered from various contemporary and posthumous accusations. As early as 1828, a certain Thomas Keightley, in a letter to Wilhelm Grimm, raised substantial allegations against Croker, charging him not only with ignorance and incompetence, but also with plagiarism of the worst kind (Heyer, 1988: 139–42). William Maginn also seems to have been embroiled in a dispute with Croker over the authorship of certain sections of the *Fairy Legends*, a controversy that apparently led to the exclusion of various parts of the collection from later editions. Sixty years later, W. B. Yeats who, in his early patriotic phase, published his own collection of *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), blamed Croker in his Introduction for an attitude that in reality was much more characteristic of Samuel Lover:

> Croker and Lover, full of the ideas of harum-scarum Irish gentility, saw everything humourised. The impulse of Irish literature of their time came from a class that did not – mainly for political reasons – take the populace seriously, and imagined the country as a humorist’s Arcadia; its passion, its gloom, its tragedy, they knew nothing of. What they did was not wholly false; they merely magnified an irresponsible type, found oftenest among boatmen, carmen, and gentlemen’s servants, into the type of a whole nation, and created the stage Irishman. (Yeats, 1977: 6f.)

The Stage Irishman is, of course, a *bête noir* of Irish literary studies, and the slightest suspicion that an author may have designed his characters to confirm English prejudices towards Ireland, especially when it comes from such an authority as Yeats, will suffice to seriously damage his reputation. More than fifty years later, in an article published at the height of Irish self-isolation and chauvinistic introspection during the ‘Emergency’, B. G. Mac-Carthy claimed that Croker owed practically all his publications to others and merely succeeded in commandeering them for himself by his clever strategies of disguising his sources. He then went on to criticise him for his descent from a Protestant middle-class family that had settled in Ireland as late [!] as the sixteenth century and therefore prevented him from understanding true Irishness:

> He was shut out. Maybe [...] for a moment, he had some inkling of an ancient race, of a people who cherished with a deep, secret, fierce tenacity an immemorial culture. If he had, the vision did not last. He determined to look into the...
matter of Irish poetry, since it might at least afford some curiosities that would interest the English public. (MacCarthy, 1943: 540f.)

The otherwise unaccountable omission of Croker from the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* must have its roots in statements of this kind.

Despite such reservations, the *Fairy Legends and Traditions* became Croker’s most popular book, surpassing by far his other publications. The first edition of 1825 was quickly succeeded by a second, newly illustrated issue (1826) which was supplemented in 1828 by two further volumes, Part II with further Irish tales, while Part III contained legends from Wales. A new edition, which collected most of the material from the earlier two Irish volumes, appeared in 1838 (irritatingly named “Second Edition”) and another volume with forty stories in 1840. For the following decades, the *British Library Catalogue* lists no less than sixteen separate editions in English, among them the posthumous edition of 1859 that contains a biographical sketch of Croker by his son and is at present available in a facsimile printing from the ULAN Press. Studying these editions is an intriguing as well as confusing business, because they differ considerably in their contents. Taken together, the complete corpus of Croker’s fairy legends may come close to one hundred tales, as compared to the twenty-seven printed in the original volume. Whether such variations may be due to Croker’s cavalier attitude towards material originally collected by others is impossible to decide today; it may, however, be of less importance when seen in the context of the impact Croker’s tales have had in the English-speaking world and beyond.

The Brothers Grimm’s contacts with Ireland did not remain restricted to the translation of the *Fairy Legends*. When Croker, in 1828, published the second volume of his collection, he documented his gratitude to the Grimms in his Preface:

[...] I cannot but feel and express a considerable degree of satisfaction at observing my former volume translated into German by such eminent scholars as the Brothers Grimm, whose friendship and valuable correspondence it has also procured me. Their version, which I had not seen when the second edition appeared [the chronology is somewhat confused here], is, as might be expected, faithful and spirited; and to it they have prefixed a most learned and valuable introduction respecting Fairy superstition in general. (Croker, 1828: v-vi)

The introduction that Croker mentions (entitled “Über die Elfen” [“About the Elves”]) was reprinted in toto (all 145 pages of it!) in English translation in his third volume of the *Fairy Legends*, a volume he dedicated to “Dr. Wilhelm Grimm, Secretary of the Prince’s Library, Member of the Royal Scientific Society of Göttingen, &c. &c. &c. at Cassel, in Hessen”. In his
own Preface, Croker entered into a lengthy dialogue with the Grimms, describing the limited number of fairy stories he had been able to find in England as opposed to the wealth of such material from Ireland, Wales and Scotland.

It must be remembered that at the time the Grimms, improving on the often irrational ‘folk’ enthusiasm represented by Johann Gottfried Herder, had already reached an international reputation as the foremost representatives of Comparative Folklore Studies as a serious academic discipline. To be praised by them, in Wilhelm’s review, for the ‘tangible authenticity’ of his collection and his ‘obvious diligence’ in its presentation must have appeared to Croker as highly welcome encouragement, especially vis-à-vis his academically trained rivals on the English literary scene. Therefore, and also because of the less strict copyright legislation of the time, he does not even seem to have resented the Grimms’ (by present standards) daring move to publish his book in translation without asking permission from the author or the publisher. Likewise, Croker apparently did not take offence at the Grimms’ unwarranted slant on the Irish people’s general character which they described in their preface quite offensively and without the slightest factual foundation for their prejudice: “Dem Irländer ist eine gewisse Beschränkung des Verstandes, aber innerhalb dieser Grenzen viel List und Gewandtheit angeboren: er ist nicht offenherzig, aber seine Verstellung ohne Bosheit” [“The Irishman has a certain innate limitation in intellect, but within these limits much cunning and skill; he is not frank but his dissimulation is without malice”] (Grimm, 1882: 371).

The Grimms’ interest in the *Fairy Legends* was partly motivated by their interest in international folklore, and partly also by their philological studies; it continued beyond the immediate occasion as can be seen from their correspondence with Karl Lachmann (cf. Leitzmann, 1927: 454, 455, 480, 483, 497f., 501, 830f., 847, and Hennig, 1946), and it extended to other Irish collectors of folklore as well. Nevertheless, the transformation of Croker’s *Fairy Legends* into *Irische Elfenmärchen [Irish Fairytales]* remained by far the most influential product of their Irish contacts, and the book’s translation and publishing process deserve a closer inspection. The German edition falls into two distinct categories. Part I, nearly two fifths of the book, contains Wilhelm Grimm’s “Einleitung: Über die Elfen” [“Introduction: About the Elves”]. Only the first eight pages, “Die Elfen in Irland”, here deal with fairy beliefs in *Ireland*. Following Croker’s own subdivision of his tales, Grimm offers a brief description of Irish fairy lore as he derived it from Croker’s collection, using the German headings “Das stille Volk” (“The Shefro”),...

This short passage, apparently based exclusively on Croker’s tales, is followed by a much longer and better-informed description of “Die Elfen in Schottland” [“The Elves in Scotland”], illustrated by a variety of fairy legends from Scotland. The third section, “Über das Wesen der Elfen” [“About the Nature of the Elves”], then presents a comprehensive survey of fairy beliefs around Europe. Subdivided, somewhat pedantically, into fourteen categories – such as “Gestalt” [“Form”], “Kleidung” [“Clothing”], “Wohnung” [“Dwelling”], “Sprache” [“Language”] or “Charakter” [“Character”] – it offers a veritable census of the fairy population, past and present, in almost all European countries or regions (even such remote areas as the Faeroe Islands), underpinned by numerous quotations in a variety of languages and documented by a bewildering array of obscure literary sources which today it would take a whole team of experts to identify and evaluate. In its unmitigated seriousness, it almost verges on the unintentionally comic. Grimm’s “Einleitung”, then, is not a specific introduction to Croker’s Fairy Legends, but, apart from one brief passage, an independent study on fairy beliefs from the earliest times to the Grimms’ present day; it firmly places the tales collected by Croker in an international context. One can only suppose that Grimm must have written it before he began to translate the Irish tales, because otherwise the book’s rapid publication would hardly have been possible.

The second part of the book presents Wilhelm Grimm’s translation of the twenty-seven tales that he found in Croker’s anonymous publication. The translation stays relatively close to the original and attempts to render plot, characters, mood and theme in the tales as faithfully as possible. The most obvious deviation from the original is the change in some of the headings: “The Legend of Knocksheogowna” becomes “Das weiße Kalb” [“The White Calf”], “The Legend of Knockfierna” is rendered as “Die erzürnten Elfen” [“The Angry Elves”], “The Legend of Knockgrafton” is “Fingerhütchen” [“Little Thimble”] and “The Legend of Lough Gur” is “Die Kuh mit den sieben Färsen” [“The Cow with the Seven Heifers”] – all of them titles that are clearly reminiscent of the Grimms’ Kinder- und Hausmärchen. It seems that Grimm attempted to dissociate the Irish tales, as far as this was possible without major alterations to the text, from the specific geographical locations where Croker had collected them, endowing them – in keeping with his own title (Elfemärchen) [Fairytales] – with the universality of Märchen instead
of the specificity of *Sagen* [Legends]. This is confirmed by certain changes he introduced in the text. Take the opening of the first tale in the collection:

> In Tipperary is one of the most singularly shaped hills in the world. It has got a peak at the top like a conical nightcap thrown carelessly over your head. On the very point is built a sort of lodge, where in the summer the lady who built it and her friends used to go on parties of pleasure, but that was long after the days of the fairies, and it is, I believe, now deserted. (Anon. [Croker], 1825: 3)

All that remains in the translation of this precise description is a vague setting that could be located almost anywhere:

> In Tipperary liegt ein Berg so seltsam gestaltet, wie einer auf der Welt. Seine Spitze besteht aus einer kegelförmigen Kuppe, auf der ein kleines Haus zur Erlustigung in den Sommertagen aufgebaut war, das jetzt auch verödet sein mag. (Anon. [Croker], 1987: 104)

> [In Tipperary is one of the most singularly shaped hills in the world. It has got a peak at the top like a conical hilltop, where a lodge was built for merriment on summer days, which may also now be deserted.]

Not only has the lady who built the house disappeared in translation but also the writer who at one time apparently had some special knowledge of the lodge (“I believe”). Grimm seems to have laid great store by the autonomy of the tale, separating it carefully from the person who wrote it down. This becomes particularly clear from the beginning of “Die Brauerei von Eierschalen” [“The Brewery of Egg-shells”] where the whole opening paragraph that serves to demonstrate the collector’s erudition has been deleted to avoid the intrusion of the writer on the autonomy of the tale: “It may be considered impertinent, were I to explain what is meant by a changeling; both Shakespeare and Spenser have already done so, and who is there unacquainted with the Midsummer Night’s Dream and the Fairy Queen” (Anon. [Croker], 1825: 28).

Other cuts, albeit for more practical reasons, occur in some of the tales where Croker had quoted folk songs which Grimm, understandably, found difficult to translate. Moreover, in his preface Grimm states with a certain degree of condescension that he has abbreviated or deleted a number of Croker’s Notes which he considered unsuitable or far-fetched:

> Nichts was zur Überlieferung selbst diente, ist von uns ausgelassen, wohl aber was ungehörig schien, darunter auch manche gerade nicht glückliche allgemeine Sprachbemerkung oder etymologische Ausführung.

> [Nothing which served the passing on of the tales itself has been left out by us, but only what seemed untoward, including some not exactly felicitous general...]

---

Heinz Kosok

92

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845249933_85
Das Erstellen und Weitergeben von Kopien dieses PDFs ist nicht zulässig.
Despite such minor alterations, Croker’s text as a whole has been left intact in translation. One cannot, therefore, claim that Grimm has tried to adapt the Irish legends to conform to the famous ‘narrative tone’ (Erzählton) of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. The German stories live in a separate world where nothing can surprise the characters or the reader, while the Irish tales occupy a borderland position between the reality that the reader knows and the fantasy existence that the central character experiences until (often through returning sobriety!) he comes back to the world of reality. The world of the Irish tales is much more unsettling and disquieting for the reader than the German *Märchen*, and there is a deep gap between the two spheres. It is a tribute to Wilhelm Grimm that he did not give in to the temptation to impose the narrative style he had so successfully evolved for the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* on the Irish tales and that he obviously tried to keep his translation in harmony with the style chosen by Croker. He was, for instance, quite successful in rendering Croker’s famous atmospheric descriptions, as in this passage from “Das gebückte Mütterchen” (“The Crookened Back”):

> Der Mond stand am Himmel, obgleich kein Wölkchen zu sehen war und hier und da ein Stern blinkte, so war der Tag noch nicht lang genug verschwunden, um helles Mondlicht zu haben; doch schien er hinhänglich, um auf einer Seite alle Dinge in des Himmels Licht bleich und silberfarbig zu machen und ein dünner Nebel begann soeben über die Felder hin zu ziehen. Auf der andern Seite, nach Sonnenuntergang zu, war noch mehr Tageslicht und der Himmel blickte ängstlich, rot und feurig durch die Bäume gleich als ob unten eine große Stadt in Brand aufloderte. (Anon. [Croker], 1987: 226–7)

[The moon was in the sky, although no cloud was to be seen and here and there a star twinkled, as the day had not disappeared long enough to have bright moonlight; but it appeared sufficiently in order to cast a pale and silver light on one side of everything, and a thin mist began to creep over the fields. On the other side, towards sunset, there was more light and the sky appeared fearful, red and fiery through the trees as if a big city had gone up in flames below.]

As can be seen here, Grimm has succeeded in imitating Croker’s style, which can be described as a fusion of the experience of ordinary country folk with the more refined, if less spontaneous, reactions of the city dweller. Croker’s characters, too, especially the more fully developed personages from the longer tales like Tom Bourke and Daniel O’Rourke, come to life in Grimm’s translation, with, however, one significant qualification. Grimm was obviously not equal to the Irish peasants’ creative imagination and unrivalled
command in the field of expletives, curses and blasphemy. In “The Priest’s Supper” (“Die Mahlzeit des Geistlichen”) Dermod Leary curses the salmon that has just escaped from his net with the help of the fairies:

May bitter bad luck attend you night and day for a blackguard schemer of a salmon, wherever you go! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, if there is any shame in you, to give me the slip after this fashion! And I’m clear in my own mind you’ll come to no good, for some kind of evil thing or other helped you – did I not feel it pull the net against me as strong as the devil himself? (Anon. [Croker], 1825: 24)

Compare this to Grimm’s rather dull version, where the translator evidently was at a loss in his choice of expletives:

Ei! So möge das böse Geschick Euch treffen Tag und Nacht, wo Ihr den Fuß nur hinsetzt, um so ein armseliges Ding von einem Fisch! Ihr müßt Euch vor Euch selber schämen, wenn Ihr noch wisst, was Scham heißt, mich auf diese Art hinters Licht zu führen! Euch hat ein anderer geholfen! Fühlte ich nicht, daß mir mit solcher Gewalt das Netz entrissen würde, als hätte es der Teufel selbst in den Klauen? (Anon. [Croker], 1987: 119)

[Oh! May bad luck attend you day and night wherever you go, such a miserable thing of a fish! You ought to be ashamed of yourself if there is any shame in you, to give me the slip in this way! Another has helped you! Did I not feel it pull the net against me as strong as the devil himself?]

In a similar way, Daniel O’Rourke curses the eagle who has left him stranded on the moon: “‘You ugly unnatural baste, and is this the way you serve me at last? Bad luck to yourself, with your hook’d nose, and to all your breed, you blackguard’” (Anon. [Croker], 1825: 139). This is rendered in translation as “‘Ist das alles und willst du mich auf diese Art verlassen, du Bestie du?’ rief ich, ‘du unnatürliches Scheusal, ist das das Ende deiner Dienstfertigkeit? Daß du verschimmeln möchtest, krumnmasiger Lump! Du und deine ganze Brut!’”[“‘Is that all and are you going to leave me like this, you beast you?’ I shouted, ‘you unnatural monster, is that the end of your service? May you rot, with your hooked nose, you blackguard! You and your whole brood!’” (Anon. [Croker], 1987: 220). Whereas the curses in “Daniel O’Rourke” develop naturally from the situation and from Daniel’s personality, in the translation they appear arbitrary in the extreme.

If the Grimms’ translation is criticised, it must be remembered that they never set foot in England, let alone Ireland, and that their command of the language (just as they spoke and wrote a number of other European languages) was exclusively acquired from secondary sources. Under these premises, it is remarkable that their translations contain so few straightfor-
ward errors. When, in “The Legend of Knockgrafton”, they confused “a wild strain of unearthly melody” with “eine fremdartige, unterirdische Musik” [“a wild strain of underground music”] (15/112), this is an exception rather than the rule.

The greatest difficulty for the translators must have lain in what can only be called the dominant mode of Croker’s tales, the grotesque – in the sense of the simultaneity of the comic and the terrible. Wolfgang Kayser’s exemplary description of the grotesque sounds as if it had been derived directly from Croker’s narratives: “Unheimliche Kräfte brechen in unsere Welt ein und entfremden sie uns, und allem Lächeln über das Verzerren und Aus-den-Fugen-geraten ist immer ein Grauen beigemischt, wenn uns nicht das Lächeln überhaupt vergeht” [“Sinister forces break into our world and alienate us and horror is always mixed with the smiling about the distortion and the coming apart at the seams, if the smiling doesn’t pass us by entirely”] (Kayser, 1956: 384). When, for instance, Daniel O’Rourke is dropped by a vicious eagle on the moon, where he holds on for dear life to a sickle sticking out of the surface, until he is pushed off by the man in the moon, whereupon he falls into the sea, where a whale “walked up to me, scratching himself after his night’s sleep, and looked me full in the face” (143) – this is, of course, extremely funny, especially when it later turns out to have been caused by an overdose of drink. Nevertheless, the experience, as Croker narrates it, is also excessively frightening, even terrifying. This is true of most of Croker’s tales, just as it is characteristic of much of Irish literature in general. One is inclined to see in it a reflection of the living conditions in much of Croker’s rural Ireland, where life was no laughing matter, although it could be tolerated only by a sense of the ridiculous. The Grimms, coming as they did from a (by comparison) safe middle-class background, despite the political controversies in which they became embroiled, must have found it extremely difficult to empathise with Croker’s poorer story-tellers.

It has already been mentioned that the Grimms’ interest in Ireland and in Croker in particular did not stop with the publication of Irische Elfenmärchen. The clearest indication of such a continued preoccupation is the fact that Wilhelm Grimm also set out on a translation of the tales from Croker’s second volume of Fairy Legends and Traditions (1828). He did, however – for reasons unknown – leave the translation unfinished, completing only nine tales from the two sections “The Merrow” and “The Dullahan”. His manuscript was discovered only in the 1980s, more than a century after his death, and published in 1986 by Elwerth of Marburg. It is today available in a popular series (insel taschenbuch 1081) under the title Irische
Land- und Seemärchen (1988), a collection that also contains a sensitive article on Croker’s life and works by Siegfried Heyer.

For most of these tales, what has been said before about Grimm’s translations is equally valid here. There are, however, three exceptions. In two cases, Grimm made the attempt to translate Irish ballads into German, dispensing with the rhyme scheme but retaining the verse form. While in “Der Lord von Dunkerron” he preserved the homogeneity of the folktale, in “Die Totenkutsche” [“The Death Coach”] he attempted to imitate Croker’s irony, transposing the rather silly puns (not very successfully) into German. Croker here derives some superficial fun from the image of the headless travellers and their equally headless horses, as for instance:

With people thus headless ’tis fun
To drive in such furious career;
Since headlong their horses can’t run,
Nor coachman be heady from beer. (Croker, 1828: 98)

This becomes in Grimm’s translation:

Mit also hauptlosen Wesen ist es ein Spaß,
zu jagen in solcher wütenden Eile,
denn über Hals und Kopf können diese Rosse nicht eilen,
noch des Kutschers Haupt vom Bier betäubt sein. (Croker, 1988: 86)

[With such headless beings ’tis fun,
To drive in such furious haste,
Since headlong these horses can’t rush,
Nor the coachman’s head be intoxicated from beer.]

Croker’s ill-chosen irony is, of course, an expression of the collector’s feelings of superiority towards his informant; and therefore it is totally out of keeping with the Grimms’ generally respectful attitude towards their sources.

The third exceptional item in Grimm’s unpublished collection is the story “The Soul Cages”. This is the narrative of Jack Dogherty, who one day makes the acquaintance of a merman. When he is invited by the merman to his comfortable house below the sea, he discovers that his host keeps the souls of drowned sailors in cages like lobster pots. Jack succeeds in making him drunk on Irish poteen and liberates the souls, a feat which apparently does not damage the growing friendship between the fisherman and the merman, until eventually the latter disappears from the area. This is the tale that, among Croker’s papers, comes closest to the modern short-story; it lends support to the argument that Croker can be seen as one of the forerunners of
the twentieth-century short-story in Ireland (Kosok, 2001: 74–6). Wilhelm Grimm’s translation is, in general, a competent rendering of the original – with, however, a number of limitations. He fails to understand some of the specifically Irish idiomatic expressions. The phrase “he had no head at all” (which translates as ‘er konnte nicht viel Alkohol vertragen’) is rendered here as “es fehlte ihm am besten” (“he was missing what is best”); for “the coast being clear” (“da die Luft rein war”) Grimm substituted “da die Küste hell war” (“the coast was bright”); and “to swallow a hair of the dog that bit him”, the colourful description of the drinker’s thirst on the morning after, is rendered literally and rather senselessly as “ein Haar von dem Hund zu verschlingen, der ihn gebissen habe” (“to swallow a hair of the dog that bit him”) (28, 37, 41). These are examples of the difficulties which the Grimms, despite their general linguistic competence, encountered in their translation work. It can only be surmised that the insight into such limitations eventually contributed to their decision not to complete, and publish, the translations from Croker’s second volume.

What were the after-effects, if any, of Croker’s volume in the Grimms’ translation? To begin with, it is remarkable that the *Irische Elfenmärchen* remained in print throughout the twentieth century in various popular series and are still available in several editions. Over the past thirty years, no less than eight respected publishers (Ullstein 1985, Rütten & Loenig 1985, Insel 1987, Bertelsmann 1999, Orbis 2002, tredition 2011, Salzwasser 2012, Bibliographisches Institut 2013) have issued new editions of the book, of which the version published by Insel Verlag (insel taschenbuch 988) that also contains Wilhelm Grimm’s long essay “Über die Elfen” is probably the best known and the most influential. Regrettably, Croker’s name has here disappeared both from the cover and the title page and is only mentioned in a small publisher’s note that most readers will overlook, while the names of the Grimms are prominent on the title page.

The *Irische Elfenmärchen* did not, however, remain the only publication of Irish folk traditions in German. In its wake, the book was followed by a spate of similar publications, some of them authentic, while others evidently were imitations that tried to cash in on a vogue that Croker, with the help of the Grimms, had started. This flow of publications from a variety of publishers has not slowed down to the present day. Here is a selection of titles from the (much longer) list of a large bookdealer, generated under the search heading ‘Irische Märchen’ and limited to the past twenty years (1994–2013). It can be assumed that all these books are still available in print:
• Lady Gregory. 2001. *Das große Buch der Irischen Mythen und Legenden.*
• Sabine Lutkat. 2007. *Feen-Märchen.*
Without inspecting these books separately, it can be seen that the three terms *Irisch*, *Elfen* and *Märchen*, or their semi-synonyms *Keltisch*, *Feen* and *Sagen*, following the Grimms’ *Irische Elfenmärchen*, are almost obligatory in the titles.

The impact of the book was, however, not limited to the publication of further Irish tales. It helped to shape an image of Ireland that has usually been described as ‘romantic’, which could imply connotations such as ‘sentimental’, ‘harmless’, even ‘childish’ and downright ‘false’. To a certain extent this is undoubtedly true, especially where the nineteenth century is concerned. A popular ballad by Conrad Ferdinand Meyer called “Fingerhütchen” can serve as an example of this type of impact. “Fingerhütchen”, it will be remembered, was the title the Grimms had given to “The Legend of Knockgrafton” from Croker’s *Fairy Legends*. Meyer here recounts in fourteen stanzas the story of hump-backed Lusmore from the Glen of Aherlow, whom the little people release from his burden because he has added a verse to their regular chant.

 Liebe Kinder, wißt ihr, wo  
 Fingerhut zu Hause?  
 Tief im Tal von Acherloo  
 Hat er Herd und Klause.  
 Aber schon in jungen Tagen  
 Muß er einen Höcker tragen,  
 Geht er, wunderlicher nie  
 Wallte man auf Erden!  
 Sitzt er, staunen Kinn und Knie,  
 Daß sie Nachbarn werden. (Meyer, 1963: 44)

[Dear children, do you know  
 Where thimble lives?  
 Deep in the valley of Acherloo  
 Is his hearth and home.  
 But ever since his youth  
 He has been a humpback,  
 When he walks, no-one on earth  
 Moves more strangely!  
 When he sits, his chin and knee  
 Are amazed that they are neighbours.]
This ballad may be seen as fairly typical of the nineteenth century German reception of Irish folk traditions, because significantly Meyer has omitted the final part of Croker’s story where another visitor to the fairies – in a grotesque reversion of Lusmore’s experience – is burdened with a second hump because he has not observed the civilities that the little people expect. The omission renders the story utterly harmless, suitable, it was assumed, for the children who are addressed in the first stanza, but falsifying the image of Ireland the poem transmits. While the Irish tale can be read as a wishful expression of the hope for justice in this life, the German text has lost all such relevance. That Meyer’s ballad made it into the 1990 (!) edition of Benno von Wiese’s authoritative anthology Deutsche Gedichte: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart (first published in 1954) is an indication of the longevity of such an image.

It would, of course, be foolish to assume that the German image of Ireland over the past two hundred years was confined to the ubiquitous existence of fairies. The major events and problems of the recent history of Ireland – the Famine, emigration, the Easter Rising, the struggle for independence, the IRA, the Emergency, EU membership, the Celtic-Tiger years, the continuing crisis in the North, the economic disaster, the revelations from the education system, to name only a few – were duly noticed and debated in Germany. Nevertheless, they did not totally overshadow the romantic image that seems to have its origin in the slim Croker/Grimm volume. Whether it is correct (at least in part) may be open to debate. Some would argue, for instance, that fairy beliefs have survived in Ireland to an extent unknown in other countries. When in Conor McPherson’s play The Weir (first performed in 1997 at the Royal Court) the existence of a ‘fairy fort’ and a ‘fairy road’ is debated, this serves not to ridicule the characters’ imagination, but is evidence of a continued suppressed (and subversive) existence of the folk beliefs that also form part of the German image of Ireland.

Likewise, it would be wrong to believe that this book was the only source for the image that Ireland has enjoyed, and still enjoys, in Germany. Professor O’Neill in Ireland and Germany has assembled an impressive array of literary texts that contributed to such a perception. Irische Elfenmärchen was, however, among the first of these sources, and its effect, supported by the authority of the Grimms, has been more persistent than any other. In O’Neill’s words:

[...]

Croker is undoubtedly the one author whose reception in Germany set up ripples whose effects are felt even today in the German perception of Ireland, to the extent in fact that his work can be said to have determined the German
image of Ireland throughout the nineteenth century at least to the same degree as that of Thomas Moore or Lady Morgan [...]. As for popular appeal, the *Irische Elfenmärchen* (‘Irish fairy tales’) finally domesticated the myth of the Island of Marvels to the scale of the drawing room, and coalesced with Ossianic mists and the heroics of Lady Morgan and Thomas Moore to form the Romantic image of Ireland which persists essentially unchanged in Germany down to the present day, tempered only by the demands of political expediency. (O’Neill, 1985: 149–50)

If, here and elsewhere, O’Neill appears to be critical of such an image, one tends to agree with him as far as it ignores or falsifies the realities, past and present, of the Irish situation. One would, however, like to point out that a ‘romantic’ image is by no means exclusively negative. The term ‘romantic’ also implies such concepts as emotional intensity, a positive awareness of the past, an emphasis on creative imagination, a clear sense of the infinite and the transcendental, and a spiritual correspondence between man and nature.

If such notions appear too high-flown or pretentious to be associated with a modest volume like Croker’s *Fairy Legends*, one could point out that, on a lower level of popular awareness, the romantic image of Ireland in Germany is at least a *friendly* image, decidedly more positive than the perception of many other countries. The German traveller who returns from Ireland can be almost certain of reactions like “Ireland? Oh ja, da möchte ich auch mal hin” [“Ireland? Oh yes, that’s a country I’d also like to visit”]. To have effected such a reaction is perhaps no mean achievement for a young man from Cork nearly two hundred years ago.

References


