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**ANE OHRVIK**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1386-4193>

University of Oslo, Department of Culture, Religion, Asian and  
Middle Eastern Studies, Norway

# BIOGRAPHY AND THE HISTORY OF KNOWLEDGE: THE FORMATION OF KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE LIFE AND WORK OF PETER CHRISTEN ASBJØRNSEN (1812–1885)

Ane Ohrvik

*The home of legends and fairy tales is the realm of fantasy. It is within this realm that the natural man exists, a figure who in his way of thinking is unable to find solutions to the riddles of life and explanations for the wonders of nature; here he finds an explanation for the hidden and the incomprehensible [...] which dates from a time when these people were in their childhood. The rich fantasy and naivety of this age can thus be seen as a characteristic of all true folktales and fairy tales. Everything in them is insightful and poetic; everywhere, storytelling replaces contemplation. [...] In its own and highly engaging way, the legend often unites a sense of deep moral truth or religious conviction with imaginative poetry.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> “Fantasiens Rige er Sagnets og Eventyrets Hjem. Derhen tyder naturmennesket, der ei paa Tænknings Vei formaaer at søge Opløsningen paa Livets Gaader og Forklaring over Naturens Undere; der finder han en Forklaring for det Skjulte og Ubegriplige [og] hidhører fra en Tid, da Folket var i sin Barndomsalder. Denne Alders Fantasirigdom og Naivitet er derfor karakteristisk for alle ægte Folkesagn og Eventyr. Alt i dem er anskueligt og poetisk; overalt træder Fortelling i stedet for Betragtning. [...] På en egen og høist indtagende Maade forener Sagnet ofte Erkjendelsen af en dyb moralsk Sandhed eller af en religiøs Overbeviisning, med en fantasifuld Digtning.” See [Peter Christen Asbjørnsen], *Nor: En Billedbog for den norske Ungdom* [...] (Christiania: Guldberg og Dzwonkowski, 1838), 61–62. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are those of the present author.

These words are attributed to Peter Christen Asbjørnsen, a prominent Norwegian folklorist, naturalist, and writer, who significantly influenced the cultural and scientific landscape of 19th-century Norway. In the introduction to his inaugural publication in a 1837 yearbook of legends and fairy tales, Asbjørnsen delves into the essence of folk poetry. This reflection is not unique to him; during the first half of the 19th century, writers, artists, and intellectuals across Europe discovered, collected, and published oral traditions such as fairy tales, legends, ballads, and songs. Folk poetry emerged as a wellspring of inspiration for literature and the arts, contributing to national romanticist movements that championed vernacular languages and linguistic nationalism. It became a crucial political tool, shaping shared national identity and fostering collective consciousness.<sup>2</sup> This was particularly pertinent in Norway, which was under Danish rule until 1814 and subsequently joined Sweden in a personal union until gaining independence in 1905. Despite Asbjørnsen's apparent modesty regarding the political role of fairy tales and legends in the above quote, he recognized their reflection of core values and moral truths, deeming them useful, important, and distinct. For Asbjørnsen, fairy tales represented the people's own poetry, emphasizing the importance of aligning them with the people's language. In contrast, legends were, according to Asbjørnsen, reflections of people's ideas and beliefs, with the content of the narratives holding more importance than the form.<sup>3</sup>

Peter Christen Asbjørnsen emerged as the most influential Norwegian folklore collector and publisher in the 19th century. Commencing his folklore collection in youth, he continued throughout his life with collecting and publishing folk traditions. His first publication of a folklore collection came with the four volumes of Norwegian folk tales between 1841 and 1844 together with Jørgen Moe (1813–1882). From this time on Asbjørnsen would publish numerous collections and editions, often illustrated by Norwegian artists. Nearly 150 years after his passing he is still the major and iconic reference to

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see Timothy Baycroft and David Hopkin, eds., *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe during the Long Nineteenth Century* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012); Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006); Joep Leerssen, *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Arne Bugge Amundsen and Anne Eriksen, *Folkloristiske Klassikere 1800–1930*. Norsk Folkeminnelags Skrifter (Trykt Utg.), 47 (Oslo: Norsk folkeminnelag / Aschehoug, 1999), 61.

Norwegian fairy tales and legends in Norway, still having the narratives he collected and published retold to new generations.

This article is based on findings from a vast collection of letters received by Asbjørnsen, testifying to his role as an impressive cultural networker in the 19th century.<sup>4</sup> This network, comprising artists, authors, academics, politicians, and publishers, significantly influenced Asbjørnsen's engagement with folklore collecting and his work in the natural sciences. The life and work of Asbjørnsen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century provide important insights into the production, dissemination, interpretation, and development of knowledge during a pivotal period for the emergence of new sciences, academic professionalization, and the formation of national states. Moreover, the study of Asbjørnsen sheds light into the ways in which knowledge actors worked and what they were concerned with. Therefore, the evolution and nature of Asbjørnsen's network may be viewed as specific aspects of the history of knowledge.

As an academic field, the history of knowledge is often likened to a mere extension of the history of science, despite its higher aspirations. According to Dupré and Somsen, it “urges us to ask questions about boundaries, hierarchies, and mutual constitution of different types of knowledge as well as the role and assessment of failure and ignorance in making knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> Peter Burke stands out as a pioneer in conceptualizing approaches to new “histories” of “knowledges.”<sup>6</sup> Burke advocates for acknowledging the geographical dimension, emphasizing space and localization, as well as adopting a broad consideration of sociologies of knowledge, which includes the study of the social conditions that produce, legitimise, and circulate knowledge.<sup>7</sup> This study incorporates both aspects, highlighting the nature of Asbjørnsen's network as a 19th-century *knowledge community*.

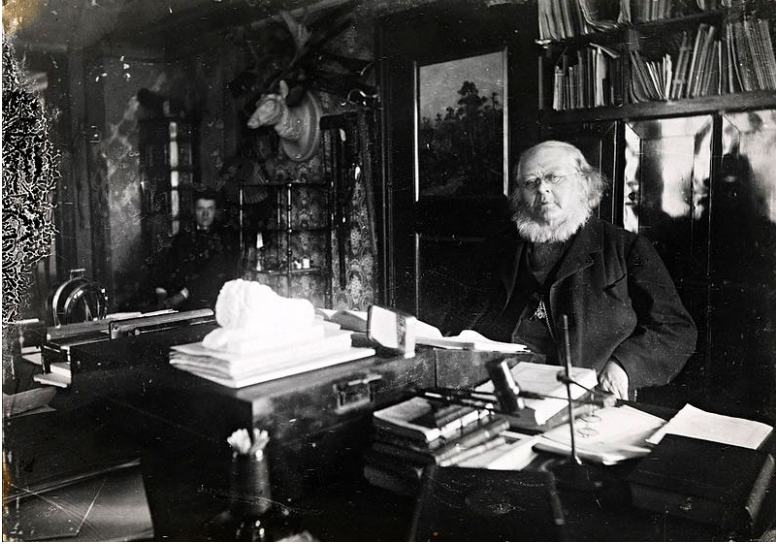
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<sup>4</sup> Parts of this study are based on the larger study of Asbjørnsen as an international networker conducted as a part of the European research project The Grimm Ripples, see Ane Ohrvik, “Mapping the Knowledge Network of the Norwegian Folklore Collector Peter Christen Asbjørnsen in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Grimm Ripples: The Legacy of the Grimms' Deutsche Sagen in Northern Europe*, ed. Terry Gunnell (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), 147–184.

<sup>5</sup> Sven Dupré and Geert Somsen, “The History of Knowledge and the Future of Knowledge Societies,” *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 42, no. 2–3 (2019), 186.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 7. See also Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge II: From the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge II*, 187–246.



**Figure 5.1.** Peter Christen Asbjørnsen (1812–1885) in his study in his later years. *Source:* Courtesy of the Norwegian Folklore Archive.

By focusing on Asbjørnsen as a specific *knowledge actor*, this study also foregrounds knowledge production, circulation and interpretation as socially embedded processes.<sup>8</sup> This approach enables an emphasis on biographies as an important keyhole methodology, shifting attention away from the structural focus on collectives that has characterised historical and sociological studies of knowledge since the 1960s and towards individual actors.<sup>9</sup> A knowledge actor is therefore understood here as an analytical category consisting of those who “within a given historical context, contributed to the production and/or circulation of knowledge.”<sup>10</sup>

The study relies on a substantial collection of letters received by Asbjørnsen during his lifetime to reconstruct his life, passions, and interests.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Johan Östling and David Larsson Heidenblad, *The History of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Östling and Heidenblad, *The History of Knowledge*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Johan Östling, David Larsson Heidenblad, and Anna Nilsson Hammar, “Revisiting Agency in the History of Knowledge,” in *Knowledge Actors: Revisiting Agency in the History of Knowledge*, ed. Johan Östling, David Larsson Heidenblad, and Anna Nilsson Hammar (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2023), 12.

His national and international network of communications, evolving from the 1830s until his death in 1885, involved frequent correspondence with individuals who later assumed culturally significant positions domestically and abroad. Notably, Asbjørnsen corresponded with fellow folklore collectors in Northern Europe, including the Grimm brothers, whose work profoundly influenced Asbjørnsen and his collaborator, Jørgen Moe, in Norway. These communications provide insights into Asbjørnsen's role as a cultural conduit during the national romantic period in 19th-century Norway, reflecting the broader history of Norway's emergence as an independent nation within a European context.

## PETER CHRISTEN ASBJØRNSEN AND HIS INTERNATIONAL NETWORKING

Peter Christen Asbjørnsen was the son of a glazier in Christiania (former name of Oslo) and the daughter of a church minister. Of five siblings, Asbjørnsen was the only one to survive childhood.<sup>11</sup> Not much is known about his childhood apart from how he himself reflects on it in retrospect much later in life. In these reflections, he makes a profound connection to and observation of nature and the natural world,<sup>12</sup> likely laying the groundwork for his subsequent studies in natural sciences at the University of Oslo and later in forestry in Tharand, Germany.

Asbjørnsen's early engagement in the collection and publication of Norwegian folk traditions, especially legends and fairy tales, became a lifelong pursuit. He collaborated with Jørgen Moe on four collections of fairy tales from 1841–1844<sup>13</sup> and published three volumes of legends on

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<sup>11</sup> Regarding Asbjørnsen's childhood, see, for example, Erik Henning Edvardsen, ed., *En dør til Asbjørnsens verden* (Oslo: Asbjørnsenselskapet / Norsk folkeminnelag / Aschehoug, 2012); Marte Hvam Hult, *Framing a National Narrative: The Legend Collections of Peter Christen Asbjørnsen* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 11–56; Knut Liestøl, *P. Chr. Asbjørnsen: Mannen og livsverket* (Oslo: Tanum-Nordli, 1984), 13–44; Hans Hansen, *P. Chr. Asbjørnsen: Biografi og Karakteristikk* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug og Co, 1932), 9–46; Alfred Larsen, *Peter Christen Asbjørnsen: En literær-biografisk skitse* (Christiania: Chr. Johnsen bogtrykkeri, 1872), 6–7.

<sup>12</sup> Olav Bø, *50 Kroner: Peter Christen Asbjørnsen* (Oslo: Norges bank, Seddeltrykkeriet, 1997), 16. See also Ohrvik, "Mapping the Knowledge Network."

<sup>13</sup> See Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, *Norske Folkeeventyr*, 4 vols. (Christiania: Johan Dahl, 1841–1844). In the first decades of Asbjørnsen's work with folklore collecting

his own in 1845, 1847, and 1879.<sup>14</sup> Asbjørnsen followed in the footsteps of early Northern European folklorists like the Danish Just Mathias Thiele (1795–1874), the Norwegian Andreas Faye (1802–1869), and the English Thomas Crofton Croker (1798–1854), all inspired by the German brothers Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859) Grimm’s early works.<sup>15</sup> He became engaged in numerous different activities and different disciplinary studies over the course of his lifetime, especially after Jørgen Moe left their professional companionship, devoting himself increasingly to an early interest in natural science and zoology. Indeed, he wrote articles on subjects as diverse as economics, nutrition, forestry, the cultivation of marshes and handicrafts, marine zoology, even publishing a cookbook at one point.<sup>16</sup> Asbjørnsen would also become the first Norwegian to disseminate the

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and publications, he was in companionship with Jørgen Moe. From the early 1850s, Moe left his work with folklore to pursue theological education before going on to serve as a church minister and later as bishop in Kristiansand in the south of Norway for the rest of his life. For more on the life and work of Jørgen Moe, see Ørnulf Hodne, *Jørgen Moe og folkeeventyrene: En studie i nasjonalromantisk folkloristikk* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1979); Ørnulf Hodne, *Jørgen Moe og folkevisene* (Oslo: Novus forlag, 2019); Arne Bugge Amundsen, “Samlere, forskere og folkeminne på 1800-tallet,” in *Etnologi og folkloristikk: En fagkritisk biografi om norsk kulturhistorie*,” ed. Anne Eriksen and Bjarne Rogan (Oslo: Institutt for sammenlignende kulturforskning, Novus forlag, 2013), 39–43.

<sup>14</sup> See Peter Christen Asbjørnsen, *Norske Huldre-Eventyr og Folkesagn, First collection* (Christiania: Johan Dahl, 1845); Peter Christen Asbjørnsen, *Norske Huldre-Eventyr og Folkesagn, Second Collection* (Christiania: Johan Dahl, 1848); Peter Christen Asbjørnsen, *Norske Folke- og Huldre-Eventyr* (København: Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag F. Hegel og Søn, 1879). For a detailed study of Asbjørnsen’s various publications and impact on the national and international scene, see Line Esborg, “Treue und Wahrheit: Asbjørnsen and Moe and the Scientification of Folklore in Norway,” in *Grimm Ripples: The Legacy of the Grimms’ Deutsche Sagen in Northern Europe*, ed. Terry Gunnell (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), 185–221.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the brothers Grimm’s influence in the early stage of folklore collecting and publications, see Terry Gunnell, ed., *Grimm Ripples: The Legacy of the Grimms’ Deutsche Sagen in Northern Europe* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022). It will be discussed further below.

<sup>16</sup> Asbjørnsen published his cookbook under a pseudonym (Clemens Bonifacius), see Clemens Bonifacius (Peter Christen Asbjørnsen), *Fornuftigt Madstel: En Tidsmæssig Kogebog og Husholdningsbog* (Christiania: P. F. Steensballe, 1864). His many books on natural science aimed at children, youth and adults were published under his legal name; see, for example, Peter Christen Asbjørnsen, *Naturhistorie for Ungdommen*, 6 vols. (Christiania: Guldberg og Dzwonkowski, 1838–1849); Peter Christen Asbjørnsen, *Lærketræet samt den nyere tyske Bartrædyrkning* (Christiania: Folkevennen, 1855); Peter Christen Asbjørnsen, *Om Skovene og et ordnet Skovbrug i Norge* (Christiania: Steensballe, 1855); Peter Christen Asbjørnsen, *Om Skovtørk og Markaat* (Christiania: P. F. Steensballe, 1861); Peter Christen Asbjørnsen, *Om Kaffeen: Dens Nytte, Værd, rette Behandling og Forfalskning samt de saakaldte Surogater eller Nømidler for samme, saasom Cichorie, Hvedekaffe, Ertepuf, Løvetand m.fl.* (Christiania: P. F. Steensballe, 1861); Peter Christen Asbjørnsen, *Norsk Landmandsbog for 1868* (Christiania: Jacob Dybwad, 1868).

evolutionist ideas proposed by Charles Darwin (1809–1882) in his *On the Origin of Species* from 1859 in a 13-page long journal article entitled *Darwins nye skapningslære* [Darwin's Doctrine on the Creation] a little over a year after Darwin's publication first appeared.<sup>17</sup>

If one considers the fourteen honorary memberships to which Asbjørnsen was elected by various Nordic and European scientific communities as well as several national memberships, it is evident that his standing as a natural and humanistic scientist – a knowledge actor – both inside and outside of the Norwegian borders was considerable.<sup>18</sup> Diplomas and grant letters preserved in the Norwegian Folklore Archive testify to this.<sup>19</sup> In 1852, Asbjørnsen became an honorary member of the Isis Society for the Promotion of Natural History in Dresden (Isis Gesellschaft für Naturkunde in Dresden). In 1858, when he graduated from the Royal Saxon Academy of Forestry (Königlich Sächsischen Akademie für Forstwirtschaft) in Tharand, he became an honorary member of The Society for German Cultural History (Der Verein für Deutsche Kultur-Geschichte) in Weimar. He later became a member of The Society for Special, and in Particular Nationalistic Natural History (Die gesellschaft für spezielle, besonders vaterländische naturgeschichte) and the Saxon Society for the Preservation and Research of National Antiquities (Thüringisch-Sächsische Gesellschaft für Erhaltung und Erforschung des vaterländischen Alterthums) in Leipzig. Later, he was granted membership of The Finnish Literary Society (Det finske litteraturselskapet) in Helsinki (1860); The Imperial-Royal Zoological and Botanical Society (Die Kaiserlich-Königliche-Zoologisch-Botanische Gesellschaft) in Vienna (1863); The Natural Science Society (Der naturwissenschaftliche Verein) in Hamburg (1863); the National Academic Society in Cherbourg (Société imperiale académique de Cherbourg) (1872); The Royal Society of Arts and Sciences (Kungliga vetenskaps och Witterhets samhället) in

<sup>17</sup> Clemens Bonifaci (Peter Christen Asbjørnsen), "Darwins nye skapningslære," *Budstikken* 2–3 (1861): 65–77. See also Liestøl, *P. Chr. Asbjørnsen*, 193–196.

<sup>18</sup> For more on Asbjørnsen's honourable membership, see Line Esborg and Ane Ohrvik, "Scientific Societies and the Formation of Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century: The Case of Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and His Honourable Memberships," in *Good Thoughts on Folklore and Mythology: Festschrift in Honour of Terry Gunnell*, ed. Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, Felix Lummer, Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir, Katrín Lísa van der Linde Mikaelisdóttir, and Júlíana Þóra Magnúsdóttir (Budapest: Trivent Publishing).

<sup>19</sup> The archive holds all the original diplomas and grant letters mentioned below.

Göteborg (1873); and the British Scandinavian Society (1876). In addition to this, he received a number of academic prizes and awards. Asbjørnsen was extremely productive, had a genuinely inquisitive outset and had a drive for exploring and learning – something his constant growing network testifies to. In this context, scientific societies functioned as key knowledge institutions that provided him with platforms for collaboration and for the exchange of discoveries, books, and naturalia. These societies played a pivotal role in legitimising and promoting scientific research, particularly in regions such as Norway where formal academic structures were less established.<sup>20</sup>

The Norwegian Folklore Archive holds approximately 1,621 letters, the majority of them written to Asbjørnsen rather than by him, leaving us with one-sided communications in most cases.<sup>21</sup> Judging from the letters preserved in the archive, Asbjørnsen's most intense networking periods were between 1854 and 1860 and from 1865 until he passed away in 1885.<sup>22</sup> These periods coincide with his most productive years as a writer, scholar, and natural scientist. However, based on carefully annotated notebooks that Asbjørnsen left behind during some of his networking years, it is possible to get a more comprehensive picture of the number of letters received and sent at least for some of these years.<sup>23</sup> The notebooks must have served as a useful tool to keep track of ongoing obligations towards those he communicated with. Covering six years of his networking between 1877 and 1883, the notebooks also make it possible to estimate the discrepancy between the number of letters present in the archive and the actual amount he might have received. Based on calculations, it appears that the letters currently

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<sup>20</sup> Norway's first university was established in Kristiania in 1811 by King Frederick VI of Denmark–Norway. The country's next university, the University of Bergen, was not founded until 1956.

<sup>21</sup> For more insight into Asbjørnsen's communications and his responses, see Anders Krogvig, ed., *Til Gerhard Gran, 9. december 1916, fra venner og elever* (Kristiania: Aschehoug); Ernst Schmidt, ed., *Briefwechsel der Gebrüder Grimm mit Nordischen Gelehrten* (Berlin: Ferd. Dümmlers Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1885). Together, these works compensate slightly for the lack of letters by Asbjørnsen elsewhere. See also *Sir Edmund Gosse's Correspondence with Scandinavian Writers*, ed. Elias Bredsdorff (London, Melbourne, Toronto: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1960), 55–76, which contains both sides of the communication between Edmund Gosse and Asbjørnsen.

<sup>22</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Anna Karlsson who worked as a research assistant for the Norwegian part of The Grimm Ripples project in 2017, assisting with the sorting of Asbjørnsen's letter collection and the digitalisation of the photographs connected to it.

<sup>23</sup> *Asbjørnsen brev: Notatbok 1879*, Manuscript, NFS, Oslo.

archived represent approximately 27% of the total letters Asbjørnsen might have received during his networking period. This suggests that the overall number of letters received by Asbjørnsen could surpass 6,000 letters. Clearly, Asbjørnsen invested significant time and energy into networking, underscoring its perceived importance for the advancement of his scholarly pursuits.

Asbjørnsen's extensive network comprises nearly 500 individuals and 10 institutions, reflecting a diverse array of professional backgrounds. This diversity aligns with Asbjørnsen's polymathic approach to knowledge, including philologists, historians, folklore collectors, folklorists, natural scientists, artists, illustrators, authors, publishers, diplomats, teachers, politicians, early feminists, church ministers, farmers, and military personnel. Notably, academics form the largest segment of this network, constituting close to 40% of the received communications. Approximately 30% of the letters originate from Norwegian contacts, while an impressive 70% involve individuals from abroad. Germany stands out as the most significant foreign network, contributing 24% to the total collection. Letters from unidentified persons account for 17%, and those from Sweden, Denmark, and England constitute the next largest categories, each ranging from 6–4%. The collection encompasses letters from 21 countries, including contacts in Russia, Malta, and the USA.

While acknowledging that Asbjørnsen's network extended beyond the representation in the Norwegian Folklore Archive's letter collection, the value of this collection lies in providing a comprehensive cross-section of the people, professions, and nationalities he communicated with. This cross-section mirrors Asbjørnsen's curiosity for knowledge, artistic interests, fascination with people and cultures, and, above all, a profound commitment and drive to showcase what he deemed culturally distinctive to Norway.

It is worth noting in this context that Asbjørnsen did not confine himself to exclusively male networks. Despite the limited scholarly attention paid to female actors in Asbjørnsen's life and work, women appear to have occupied a significant position within his intellectual and social milieu. Asbjørnsen's correspondence attests to sustained contact with several dozen women who sought his advice and support and offered the same in return. A preliminary investigation of these women's biographies points to a network of female



**Figure 5.2.** In the collection of letters after Asbjørnsen, numerous portraits sent by fellow international folklorists within his network are found. The top rows, left to right, features Edmund Gosse (1849–1928), Felix Liebrecht (1812–1890), Eirikur Magnússon (1833–1913) and George E. J. Powell (1850–1904), and Reinhold Köhler (1830–1902). The bottom row, left to right, features Konrad Maurer (1823–1902), Johannes Skar (1837–1914), and Carl Säve (1812–1876). *Source:* Courtesy of the Norwegian Folklore Archive.



**Figure 5.3.** Some of the female knowledge actors with whom Asbjørnsen corresponded. Starting from the top left, they are Aasta Hansteen (1824–1908), Camilla Collett (1813–1895), Fredrika Bremer (1801–1865), and Antonine Løchen (1850–1933). The bottom row, from left to right, features Mélanie Borring (1835–?), Thora Storm (1845–1935), Hedevig Rosing (1827–1913) and Eva Wigström (1832–1901). *Source:* Courtesy of the Norwegian Folklore Archive.

pioneers in nineteenth century Norway and Europe.<sup>24</sup> These women pursued higher education and advocated women’s right to vote and education, they established and led educational institutions for children and young people, and they worked as authors and managed both large and small enterprises.

The topics covered in the letters as a whole can be broadly classified into two main categories. The first category revolves around the practical aspects of networking, including organizing physical meetings across Europe, providing endorsements for colleagues and friends, exchanging tokens related to shared interests or ambitions (often leading to the exchange of personal portraits), diverse transactions related to publications, drafting agreements

<sup>24</sup> Ane Ohrvik, “Conceptualising the Nordic through Nineteenth-Century Women: Examining Peter Christen Asbjørnsen’s (1812–1885) Network of Female Cultural Actors,” unpublished, Åbo, 2025.

for publications, creating sketches for planned publication illustrations, and formal invitations concerning membership in scientific societies. The second category delves more directly into the general exchange of knowledge, ranging from the exchange of books and magazines to the discussion and reception of knowledge and ideas. Within this category, the Brothers Grimm held a prominent position and wielded considerable influence in Asbjørnsen's network.

## THE BROTHERS GRIMM, ASBJØRNSEN, AND 19TH CENTURY ROMANTIC NATIONALISM

Terry Gunnell highlights the transformative impact of the publication of *Deutsche Sagen* [German Legends] by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm presented in two volumes in 1816 and 1818. According to Gunnell, it triggered a “Romantic Nationalistic cultural tsunami,” sparking a cascade of publications on legends, fairy tales, and other folk poetry across Europe, particularly in the Northern regions.<sup>25</sup> In the introduction to their book, the Grimm brothers recommended it to:

*[...] devotees of German poesie, history and language and hope that it will be welcome to all as purely German fare. For it is our firm belief that nothing is as edifying or as likely to bring more joy than the products of the Fatherland. Indeed, an apparently insignificant, self-occasioning discovery and endeavour in the study of our own indigenous culture can in the end bring more fruit than the most brilliant discovery and cultivation of foreign fields.*<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Terry Gunnell, “Introduction,” in *Grimm Ripples: The Legacy of the Grimms' Deutsche Sagen in Northern Europe*, ed. Terry Gunnell (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), 4. The publication *Grimm Ripples: The Legacy of the Grimms' Deutsche Sagen in Northern Europe* follow suit in this claim assessing the influence and effect Grimm's different writings had on the 19th century cultural movements in Europe, bringing together nineteen European scholars.

<sup>26</sup> “den Liebhabern deutscher Poesie, Geschichte und Sprache und Hoffen, es werde ihnen allen, schon als lautere deutsche kost, willkommen sehn, im festen Glauben, dass nichts mehr auferbaue und grössere Freude bei sich habe als das Vaterländische. Ja, eine bedeutungslos sich anlassende Entdeckung und Bemühung in unserer einheimischen Wissenschaft kann leicht am Ende mehr Frucht bringen als die blendendste Bekanntwerdung und Andbauung des Fremden.” See Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsche Sagen*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1816–1818), vol. 1, xxiv–xxv. The translation is taken from Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *The*

To the Grimms, the legends were a distinct German product reflecting its history and language in specific ways. Folk poetry, to them, unveiled unique cultural traits tied to specific localities and nationalities, embodying the spirit of the people to whom the poetry belonged. To the Grimms,

*[T]he fairy tale is more poetic, the legend is more historical; the former exists securely almost in and of itself in its innate blossoming and consummation. The legend, by contrast, is characterized by a lesser variety of colors, yet it represents something special in that it adheres always to that which we are conscious of and know well, such as a locale or a name that has been secured through history. Because of this local confinement, it follows that the legend cannot, like the fairy tale, find its home anywhere. Instead the legend demands certain conditions without which it either cannot exist at all, or can only exist in less perfect form.<sup>27</sup>*

This perspective led the Grimms to position the collection and publication of folklore, including legends, fairy tales and ballads, within a national framework as part of a larger national project.<sup>28</sup> In a Nordic context, Jacob Grimm’s call for the collection of folkloric material in his review of *Prøver af Danske Folkesagn* [A Sampler of Danish Folk Legends] by J. M. Thiele (1795–1874), published in 1818, marked the initial expression of this concept. Grimm asserted that such material would hold significant value for the study of German and Scandinavian history:

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*German Legends of the Brothers Grimm*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Donald Ward (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1981), vol. 1, 11.

<sup>27</sup> “Das Märchen ist poetischer, die Sage historischer; jenes steht beinahe nur in sich selber fest, in seiner angeborenen Blüte und Vollendung; die Sage, von einer geringern Mannichfaltigkeit der Farbe, hat noch das Besondere, daß sie an etwas Bekanntem und Bewußtem hafte, an einem Ort oder einem durch die Geschichte gesicherten Namen. Aus dieser ihrer Gebundenheit folgt, daß sie nicht, gleich dem Märchen, überall zu Hause seyn könne, sondern irgend eine Bedingung voraussetze, ohne welche sie bald gar nicht da, bald nur unvollkommener vorhanden seyn würde.” See Grimm, *Deutsche Sagen* (1816–1818), vol. 1, vi–vii. The translation is taken from Grimm, *The German Legends of the Brothers Grimm*, vol. 1, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ideas about the spirit of the people, of folk, the local and the national had their inspiration in thinkers like Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Adam Ohlenschläger (1779–1850) and others, see Baycroft and Hopkin, eds., *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe*; Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe*; Leerssen, ed., *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*. For more on *Deutsche Sagen* and Grimm’s collection plan, see Holger Ehrhardt, “The Grimm Brothers’ *Deutsche Sagen*: Collection Plan, Sources, Critiques, Reception,” in *Grimm Ripples: The Legacy of the Grimms’ Deutsche Sagen in Northern Europe*, ed. Terry Gunnell (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), 43–69.

*Would it not be fortunate if Norway, Gotland and Sweden also gave some attention to collecting what must have been more faithfully preserved there than anywhere else considering the peaceful, enduring nature of these lands; there is little doubt about what the inseparable German and Nordic histories would gain from such a venture.<sup>29</sup>*

Whether Asbjørnsen ever read this encouraging invitation is uncertain, but we do know that Asbjørnsen's reading of works by the Grimms goes back at least to 2nd December 1832, when the 20-year-old Asbjørnsen is recorded as having borrowed the first volume of Grimms' *Deutsche Grammatik* from the library.<sup>30</sup> In the years to follow, the publications by the Grimms would be borrowed regularly from the University Library in Christiania (now Oslo) until a regular correspondence with the Grimm brothers themselves ensured the actual deliverance of the latest publications – and encouragement.<sup>31</sup>

In these letters, the first of which comes from 1844, Asbjørnsen and the Grimms exchange greetings and pass on greetings from others; vouch for people who wish to meet them up or are in need of patrons; exchange books and articles written both by themselves and others; exchange thoughts and reflections on different publications, and, of course, also discuss issues relating to folklore. Encouragement and support – especially from the Grimms themselves – were evidently of great importance to Asbjørnsen as were testimonies of warm approval, something that Jacob Grimm, in particular, seems to have handed out on a regular basis. Associations with dominant figures in knowledge networks, such as that which surrounded the Grimms was naturally highly valuable, not least because patrons and supporters could contribute in ensuring stipends and book contracts and in

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<sup>29</sup> “Wollte es nun das Glück, daß man in Norwegen, Gothland und Schweden ebenfalls aufmerksam würde und sammelte, was sich in der ruhigen, dauerhaften Natur dieser Länder treuer als irgendwo erhalten haben muß; so wird sich recht deutlich zeigen, welchen Gewinn die unzertrennliche deutsche und nordische Geschichte aus einer solchen Unternehmung ziehen kann.” See Jacob Grimm, “[Rez.] *Prøver af danske folkesagn, samlede af J. M. Thiele* (Kjöbenhavn, 1817), 36 S. in 8°,” *Wünschelrute* 50 (June 22, 1818): 200.

<sup>30</sup> Hult, *Framing a National Narrative*, 31.

<sup>31</sup> The letters between Asbjørnsen and Jacob Grimm confirm a regular sending of books between the two men which goes back to the first documented letter between them in 1844, see *Asbjørnsen brev: Letter from Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe to Jacob Grimm, October 16, 1844*, Manuscript, NFS, Oslo.

helping to build an international reputation, but also for developing your personal standing in a competitive local environment.

In the first extant communication with Jacob Grimm from 1844, Asbjørnsen and his co-writer Moe in a polite and solemn manner deliver the second volume of *Norske Folkeeventyr* [Norwegian Fairy Tales] to Jacob Grimm "... with the hope that our narrative style, which has been blamed for its overly local colour, will not displease you."<sup>32</sup> The use of language, and in particular, the Norwegian language, which Asbjørnsen and Moe briefly touch upon in this initial communication, would come to be a dominant theme in the letters between Asbjørnsen and Jacob Grimm in the years that followed. In a letter from Jacob Grimm dated 7th August 1849, the language of the North along with the development of the science of folklore collection is clearly a key theme, as Grimm praises

*[...] the intense scientific work that is being conducted in Norway. How uplifting to see such a blossoming, after Sweden and Denmark have had the lead in this for so long, in the country which was the original seat of the pure Nordic language, where the sense for antiquity seemed to have all but died out. Now you are making up for everything and even handling some things better than the Swedes and Danes could. One is quite aware of how beneficial freedom affects all life. [...] What you have already done for Norwegian legend and poetry deserves the greatest thanks and is highly recognised amongst us. [...] I want to keep both of you convinced that I am eagerly following your extensive discoveries. Few Danish writers seem to handle the Nordic language as completely and cleverly as you can. With great respect. Your most devoted Jacob Grimm.*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "... med Ønske om, at vor Fortællingsmaade, som man har bebreidet en altfor local Farve, ikke maa mishage Dem." See *Asbjørnsen brev: Letter from Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe to Jacob Grimm, October 16, 1844*, Manuscript, NFS, Oslo.

<sup>33</sup> "...über die rege wissenschaftliche thätigkeit in Norwegen berichtet. Wie erhebend ist dies aufblühen, nachdem so lange zeit Schweden und Dänemark vorausgegangen waren und in dem lande selbst, das der ursprüngliche sitz der reinen nordischen sprache war, der sinn für das alterthum erstorben schien. Jetzt werden Sie alles reichlich nachholen und sogar manches besser anfassen, als es von Schweden und Dänen geschehn konnte. Man gewahrt recht, wie wolthätig die freiheit überall auf das leben einwirkt. [...] Was Sie bereits für norwegische sage und poesie geleistet haben, verdient den grössten dank und wird zumal unter uns anerkannt. [...] halten Sie sich beide überzeugt, dass ich Ihren reichhaltigen entdeckungen eifrig nachfolge. Wenige dänische schriftsteller scheinen die nordische sprache so vollständig und geistreich

Grimm's preoccupation with language, its historicity, and how language served a crucial role in reflecting cultural traits also led him to pass on warnings to Asbjørnsen whenever he saw a potential threat to it. When Asbjørnsen reveals a cooperation with the German Johan Grässe in an international collection of tales entitled *Nord und Süd* from 1858, Jacob Grimm is not overly pleased: "I do not know Grässe personally and consider him a learned, careful man, but do not let your free style be corrupted by him, for he writes somewhat stiffly."<sup>34</sup> In the book, Asbjørnsen was responsible for the Nordic tales while Grässe was responsible for those from the other European and Oriental areas. Grimm's criticism focused mainly on the way in which the tales were told in German, but it is clear he is eager for Asbjørnsen to make use of the particular Norwegian style and colour in his writing and storytelling. Language itself and its specific cultural qualities were evidently important features of Asbjørnsen and Grimm's joint scientific and political project in the 19th century.

## A 19TH CENTURY KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITY

Asbjørnsen's network was a knowledge network sharing many of the characteristics of the network which has been coined the "Republic of Letters" from the early modern period. As a concept, it has been used to refer to the "self-proclaimed metaphysical community of scholars and intellectuals in early modern Europe that exchanged knowledge, viewpoints and perspectives with each other" in various forms of communication from which letter writing dominated that transcended national borders.<sup>35</sup> It was a community, to use Anthony Crafton's words, resembling a republic with "no borders, no government, and no capital."<sup>36</sup> It was first coined in Latin as "respublica

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zu handhaben, wie Sie es vermögen. Ich bin mit grosser hochachtung. Ihr ergebenster Jacob Grimm." Here cited from Krogvig, *Til Gerhard Gran*, 175–176.

<sup>34</sup> "ich kenne Grässe nicht persönlich und halte ihn für einen gelehrten, sorgfältigen mann, aber lassen Sie sich Ihren freien stil nicht von ihm verderben, denn er schreibt etwas steif." See Krogvig, *Til Gerhard Gran*, 183–185.

<sup>35</sup> Ohrvik, "Mapping the Knowledge Network," 152.

<sup>36</sup> Anthony Crafton, *Worlds Made by Words: Scholarship and Community in the Modern West* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 9.

literaria” in a letter from the early 15th century.<sup>37</sup> The idea of the “Republic of Letters” developed throughout the early modern period and referred to a specific form of knowledge exchange. As journals during the period also received names referring to the republic, they became testimonies of the intellectual communities that lay behind them.<sup>38</sup>

In most studies of the “Republic of Letters,” modernity is seen as the threshold from which this republic came under pressure from nationalism and later from various forms of intellectual specialization. Indeed, the nature of the knowledge that had characterized it during the early modern period had been based on ideas relating to imperial, linguistic and political hegemony. Evidently, however, the production and exchange of knowledge did not stop in the 19th century, rather it was the focus of the knowledge that shifted.

So, what was characteristic of the knowledge exchange in the 19th century? According to Peter Burke, the active exchange of knowledge, viewpoints and perspectives did not undergo any fundamental change in Europe when entering into the modern period; it was how this knowledge actually travelled that did.<sup>39</sup> Although the active exchange of knowledge continued during the 19th century, this small study of Peter Christen Asbjørnsen’s networking in the 19th century shows that the exchanges were now motivated by new ideas and preconditions. New subject fields and academic disciplines were identified and developed, and new groups and networks formed in specific places and localities. These new ideas were dominated by a nationalized cultural consciousness, and artists and

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<sup>37</sup> The term appears in the letter by Francesco Barbaro (1390–1454) to Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), dated July 6, 1417; see Hans Bots and Françoise Waquet, *La République des Lettres* (Paris, Berlin: De Boeck, 1997), 11–13.

<sup>38</sup> For more on the journal writings, see the discussions in Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); Crafton, *Worlds Made by Words*; Ellen Krefting, Aina Nøding, and Mona Ringvej, eds., *Eighteenth-Century Periodicals as Agents of Change: Perspectives on Northern Enlightenment, Library of the Written World*, vol. 42 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015).

<sup>39</sup> In his study of the various modes of communication used at different times in “The Republic of Letters,” Burke talks of “the horse-drawn republic” which lasted until 1800; the “steam republic” which lasted from 1800 until 1950; the “fly republic” which lasted from 1950 until 1990; and most recently the “digital republic,” with reference to contemporary society: see Peter Burke, “The Republic of Letters as a Communication System: An Essay in Periodization,” *Media History* (2012): 1–13.

intellectuals exchanged ideas while central concepts such as “folk” and “nation” were under construction and subject to diverse interpretation. These interpretations had significant political and cultural impact on the process of nation-building that took place in Northern Europe during the early and mid-19th century. The knowledge production was now driven by new ideas and preconditions as new subjects were discovered and developed in new places and locations where new groups and networks were formed. Consequently, although the complete conceptual framework of “the Republic” is not fully discernible in nineteenth-century European knowledge networks, this network analysis of Asbjørnsen demonstrates that many of its central mechanisms were nevertheless operative as emerging knowledge actors and networks shaped new disciplinary agendas and pursued cultural-political strategies in a geopolitically transforming Europe.

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