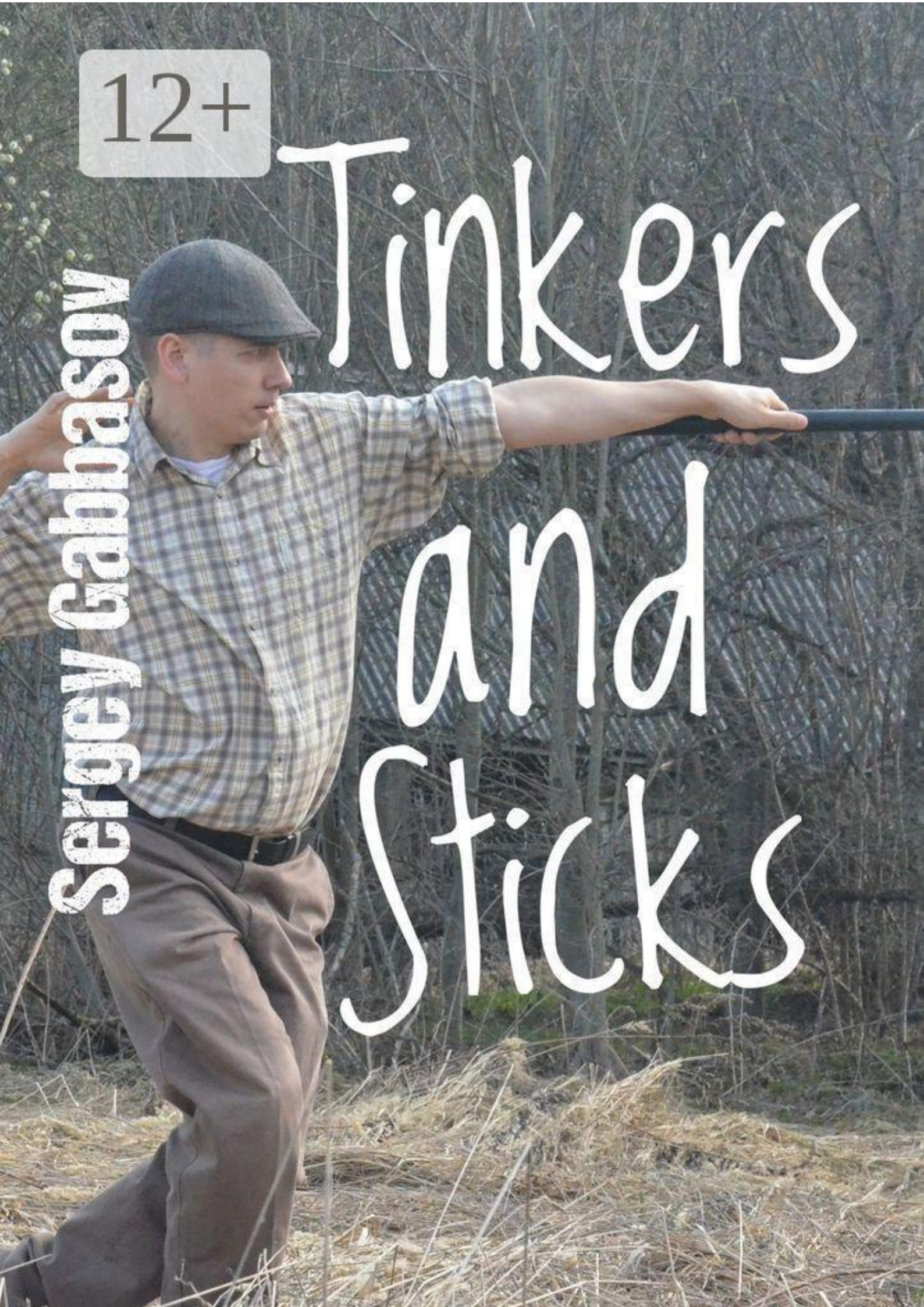
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Tinkers and Sticks

Sergey Gabbasov



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«Издательские решения»

Gabbasov S.

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Arriving in the British Isles in the 15th century, the Gypsies were surprised to discover that a people whose way of life and occupations were strikingly similar to their own already lived there. These were the so-called «Travellers» — an ethnic group of Celtic origin.Ireland is also famous for its unique tradition of stick fighting, «bataireacht» (pronounced as «bataract»). How this rare tradition is connected to the «Travellers» is what this book explores.

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Sergey Gabbasov

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Irish Travellers and Stick Fighting

Approximate date of arrival of Gypsies on the territory of Ireland — 1430 year (Vesey-Fitzerald 1944). They came mostly from France to England by crossing the Channel and then — to Ireland. But how great was the surprise of that "*Roma*" when they met almost the same groups of people — nomadic (or semi-sedentary), with very similar occupations… but speak Irish and their own dialect. They were "*Pavee"* or "*Minkiers"* ("*Lucht Siúil"*, "the walking people" in Irish). We know them as "*Irish Travellers*". "*Pikey*" or "*pikie*" is a slang derogatory and pejorative term. Knowledge of *Irish Travellers* has been seen from the 1100s (Gmelch 1975).

Until 1960s most of them traveled through the countryside, living in "*bender*" and "*shelter*" types of tents, at first on foot and later in horse-drawn carts and wagons. They were commonly called "*tinkers*" from the trade of tinsmithing, "*knackers*" from the practice of selling old horses for slaughter, and, at the beginning of 1960s, "itinerants" (the less pejorative term introduce by governments) (Gmelch & Gmelch 2014). The mainstream Irish population regards them as different, calling them "*tinkers*", "*itinerants*", "*Travelling-*" or "*Walking People*", and clearly derogatory names like "*knackers*", "*gypos*", and "*pikeys*". In the past, *Travellers* were sometimes referred to more benevolently, if condescendingly, as "*nature's gentry*" and "*knights of the road*", among other similar terms (ibid.).

The analog of this ethnic (or social?) group on the mainland are *Yenish* people, who were widespread from South-West France to Belgium and East Austria. They are not connected with Gypsies, but they are descended from members of the marginalized and vagrant poor classes of society of the early modern period, and emerged as a distinct group by the early 19th century (Lucassen, Willems 1998; Lucassen 1993; Seidenspinner 1993; Seidenspinner 1985).

Genetic research conducted in the 1970s and an analysis of the DNA of forty individuals in 2010 show, that travelers have no connection with Gypsies ("*Romanichal"* in England, "*Kale"* in Welsh, "*Roma"* in Europe), they are native to Ireland and have lived there as long as anyone (Gmelch & Gmelch 2014). Present genetic evidence indicates that they are genetically Irish. The study of 2011 done by the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin and the University of Edinburgh provided evidence that *Irish Travellers* are a distinct Irish minority, who have been distinct from the settled Irish community for at least 1000 years. However, this apparent distance may be the effect of genetic drift within a small homogeneous population and may therefore exaggerate the distance between the two populations (Hough 2011; North et al. 2000; Murphy et al. 1999). A genetic analysis of *Irish Travellers* found evidence to support: 1) Irish ancestry; 2) several distinct subpopulations; and 3) the distinctiveness of the midland counties due to Viking influence (North et al. 2000).

In 2017 a further genetic study confirmed ancestral origin within the general Irish population. An estimated time of divergence between the settled population and *Travellers* was set at a minimum of 8 generations ago, with generations at 30 years, hence 240 years and a maximum of 14 generations or 420 years ago. The best fit was estimated at 360 years ago, giving an approximate date in the 1650s. This date coincides well with the final destruction of Gaelic society following the 1641 Rebellion and during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms (of Ireland, Scotland and England, 1639—1651) in which Cromwell's forces devastated the country (Gmelch & Gmelch 2014).

Another research suggests that *Traveller* origin may in fact date as far as back as 420 years to 1597. The Plantation of Ulster began around that time, with native Irish displaced from the land, perhaps to form a nomadic population (ibid.). Some researches place their origin as a separate ethnic group much earlier, even before the coming of the Celts to Ireland (Mac Laughlin 1996).

According to the Department of the Environment figures, there are approximately 4000 *Traveller* families in Ireland today making a total *Traveller* population of some 22,000 people. This represents just over 0,5% of the total national population (Ó Riain 1997). However other sources have

estimated the *Irish Traveller* population in Ireland could be as high as 28,000 (Liégeois & Gheorghe 1995). From the 2006 Irish census it was determined that there were 22,369 *Travellers*, 20,975 dwell in urban areas and 1460 were living in rural areas (Census 2014). According to 2011 national census, 29,573 *Travellers* live in the Republic of Ireland — less than 1% of its population of 4,58 million (Census 2011). Other resources give the population of 32,302 *Travellers* (Reider 2018). Meanwhile there are 19,000 *Travellers* live in Britain (Ó Riain 1997; McDonagh & McVeigh 1996). There are, according to government figures from 1998, approximately 150 *Irish Traveller* families in Northern Ireland and this gives a figure of between 800 and 1000 people (Committee 1998).

Throughout Ireland's history a variety of occupational groups were nomadic. As early as the fifth century, metal workers or "whitesmiths" traveled the countryside fashioning jewelry, weapons, and horse trappings out of bronze, silver, and gold in exchange for food and lodging. Other specialists, including weavers, thatchers, musicians, and bards, also traveled Ireland's roads in past centuries. Ward, the Anglicized form of the Irish "*Mac an Bhaird*" ("son of the bard"), is one of the most common *Traveller* surnames, and the Wards are regarded by other *Travellers* as one of the oldest families on the road (Gmelcn & Gmelch 2014).

At the outbreak of World War II, Ireland's *Travellers* were still a nomadic and rural people. Their most common occupations, besides making tinware, were cleaning chimneys, dealing in donkeys and horses, peddling, small household wares, and picking crops, all in exchange for food, clothing and money. *Travellers* also made clothespins, brooms, and baskets, repaired umbrellas, sharpened knives, collected and recycled horse hair, feathers, and bottles, and exploited the superstitions and hopes of the settled Irish through begging, fortune-telling, and bogus money-making schemes (ibid.).

Most families traveled and camped on the roadside from St. Patrick Day in mid-March (when, it was said, the stones turned over in the water and the cold went out of the winter) until November, when wet, bone-chilling weather returned. Some then moved into modest cottages in what they considered to be their home village, while others took shelter in abandoned "waste" houses in the countryside. While travelling, families seldom remained in one place for more than a couple of weeks, staying only as long as work was available. Most families traveled regular circuits through two or three neighboring counties and were well known to local people, even acquiring affectionate nicknames. But some families traveled widely and had weaker ties to the settled population (which are called "*buffers*

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