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Scott the Scot

Who knew you could get a job in the 21st century teaching people how to fight with swords and wear authentic renaissance kilts? Well, you can if you live the renaissance fair life. If you want to know what that is like, I recommend that you talk to Scott Munro, a burly, red-bearded giant who looked every bit the highland chieftain his name suggests, especially when he strides along in his red tartan kilt with one hand resting on the hilt of his huge sword. Scott was kind enough to give me an interview recently from his pavilion at the California Renaissance Faire in Hollister, California. Many people think that it is all actors and nerds that go to these things to dress up as characters from The Lord of the Rings, but it is so much more than that, as my talk with Scott revealed.

To find Scott in his professional habitat, I walked around the labyrinth of shops and pavilions, dodging past the mix of people dressed in costumes. I saw everything from a mix of historically accurate Italian foot soldiers to tavern wenches with varying degrees of extreme cleavage (which I wish I had not seen). After wandering around my first renaissance fair, I finally sat down in the pavilion of a Scottish guild.

I actually found my interviewee, Scott (no joke, he is Scott the Scot) by his approaching me and commenting on my “improper kilt.” I was wearing a pair of plaid shorts, and I guess he assumed it was some sort of strange kilt. We sat in the pavilion of the clan McClain; there were many different groups there, representing different countries and regions. I chose to focus on the Scottish, since I am part Scot and very proud of that heritage. As we sat down a few other people from the guild began to gather as well. “I guess this is sort of a group interview,” I thought.

 Scott explained to me that the true goal of the renaissance fairs is to inform the public about what life was like back then. He told me that while it is fun to dress up and act like someone from history, it does take a lot of work to ensure that you are accurate. He pointed to a group of pirates all wearing heavy armor and demanding “grog” from passersby. “We really try to avoid that sort of thing,” he said in a slightly annoyed tone. “They have no respect for those of us that try to be historically accurate, and they always try to undermine our credibility.” Scott called over a teenager about my age and pointed to the pink pouch that the boy had on his belt. He explained how all purchases must be reviewed by the guild leaders in order to ensure their accuracy. I asked why the pouch was bright pink, and the teenager told me that in the shop, which he purchased it from, it looked very tan. Scott began to laugh and told the teenager that the color pink was in fact a very manly color in the renaissance due to the difficulty of achieving the proper tone.

 I was a little surprised to see several teenagers of varying ages walking around the encampment, but Scott explained that they have nearly a dozen teenagers who are members of the guild. “We call them The Gaggle. While they do have a lot of fun, they also do a lot of work, too. They make sure that the food table is stocked for the day and that all the water jugs have enough water. On top of this, they also get to handle security for us, which is more of an excuse for them to handle real weapons instead of the wooden ones that they practice with.” By this time the group of teenagers were gathered in a roped-off circle to watch two of them fighting with wooden claymores.

Scott explained that other than dressing up in costumes and talking in accents, guild members spend the majority of their time in pavilions, which would be boring except that they all bring things to do. He points to the teenagers who are now fighting in two teams and are gathering a crowd of spectators. “The teenagers have a lot of energy so it’s pretty easy to just hand them some weapons and let them go crazy on each other. The adults can’t do that all day, though, otherwise we’d just collapse.”

He points to a pair of women who are sitting at spinning wheels and explaining something to a group of onlookers. “Those two knit outside of fairs, and it only made sense that they bring it here, but others of us have to be more creative. You can see what we do if you just look around.” I look around and just at a glance I can see several people practicing various crafts from traditional cooking to juggling to leatherworking. As we are talking one of the cooks began handing out wooden bowls with some kind of a sausage mixed with an oaty porridge. I was offered a small paper cup filled with it, and it was fantastic

 Scott informed me that a huge part of the fun of these fairs is to see the shops, and he offered to show me around. We walked around for nearly an hour. Scott showed me some of the shops that had smaller crowds. They had more expensive items, including boots that cost nearly a thousand dollars but are hand-crafted to fit the customer’s feet perfectly and swords that are actually made the way that swords were made in the renaissance. These items are not just made. They are crafted. The people who own these shops and make these items are artists. They spend all their lives learning how to create something from a time that no longer is. They carry on a tradition that, without them, would die. When you talk to these people, they are so excited to talk to someone. They really are people who do something that they love. When I left to go speak to another vender, they all said something along the lines of saying, “Thank you for talking to me. It really means a lot.” These people are truly artists and historians all wrapped into one.

Not surprisingly, Scott explained that he was drawn into this world through his interest in history. He started attending when he was a high school history teacher who would bring students on a fieldtrip to the local fair. After nearly five years of doing this, he decided to try to join. It was apparently very easy to do, and he rose to the position of guild leader within ten years. He has been doing this for fifteen years now. In explaining his choice of the Scottish guild, he said, “Many people choose to join a guild representing their own culture, though that’s not a requirement.”

After the artisan venders we went to look at some of the other guilds. Scott led me around to the historical pavilions. “These people are like my guild just from different culture,” he explained as we walked past over a dozen different encampments from nearly as many different cultures, from Italian to German. I could understand why a history teacher would bring his students here—you could learn all about the history of these many cultures by talking to the different guilds who represented them.

 Eventually we made our way back to the pavilion. As we sat down, we could still hear the clack of the wooden waster swords, and suddenly we heard a snap and a yell. While sparring, one of the swashbuckling teenagers of the Gaggle had blocked wrong and the broken sword had struck his hand, dislocating his fingers. Immediately John went to him and began shouting to the adults. But Scott was not panicking about it. No one was. As if this were just part of the game, everyone moved very quickly to solve the problem. They all seemed to know what to do. Even though it appeared that the boy’s parents were not there, everyone treated him like family. The girl who hit him was yelling at him about why he apparently blocked wrong. He was yelling back to the point when one of the adults (an EMT) reset his hand and took him to the hospital. Scott told me that I should probably go now because this might take a bit.

As I took a last look at the little knot of people closing in around the wounded boy, some saying sympathetic things, someone clutching his shoulders supportively, his sparring partner still analyzing the mistake, I realized that this was more than a professional guild. These people treat each other like family, including all the ups and all the downs. Few organizations are able to achieve this so well. Who could resist all this pageantry, historical insights, danger, and camaraderie? Not me. I am now searching for a local guild that my family and I can join.

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\*Although the bulk of this is by Nate Scovill, I hope he will forgive me for making some slight revisions. The great parts are his; I just tidied things up a bit.

His audience was young people interested in history. His forum was the Web site for his high school, particularly the page for the History Club (a chapter of the Society for Creative Anachronism <http://www.sca.org/>

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