



Scholarship not all work and no swordplay

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Sweet Briar's Anne Gary Pannell Merit Scholarship lets exceptional first-year students spend their sophomore year exploring something that really interests them — something beyond their normal academic responsibilities, just because they want to know about it.

Last year, Kaitlin Schaal '15 used hers for a self-directed study of sword-and-shield fighting and two-handed sword fighting.

In "Rediscovering Western European Historical Swordsmanship," she set out to research and perform the techniques using historically accurate practice weapons. She used books and online resources to learn about the mechanics from people who study and practice the discipline.

In addition to a wooden practice blade, she ordered a one-handed sword and a replica of Andúril, the elven long sword wielded by Aragorn in "Return of the King" from J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy. Sweet Briar's post office staff became accustomed to receiving long, skinny packages addressed to her.

By year's end Schaal had a "decent, if basic, working knowledge of medieval German swordsmanship." Her early investigations revealed that many fighting techniques were developed in Germany, and that made the project appealing to her.

Schaal grew up in culturally diverse Northern Virginia, where many of her peers had strong ethnic identities. It made her curious about her own German-Scots-Irish heritage. The Pannell Scholarship allowed her to both explore her roots and help preserve a part of her people's history that had captured her imagination. A lifelong reader of fantasy novels, she'd often wondered about the origins of medieval sword fighting.



Kaitlin Schaal '15, shown with a replica of the elven long sword Andúril from J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings," completed a self-directed study of sword-and-shield fighting and two-handed sword fighting with her Pannell Scholarship.



As a biology major with plans to pursue a Ph.D. in evolutionary genetics, Schaal concedes the project has little to do with her career plans. She could have used the scholarship for science research. But at Sweet Briar, there are always opportunities to work side-by-side with faculty. Learning sword strokes with a blade nearly as long as she is tall is another matter entirely.

Besides, Schaal is minoring in English and creative writing, as well as chemistry, and has participated in the College's annual conference for undergraduate writers. Her research may prove fertile ground for fiction writing, she says.

— Jennifer McManamay

