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Inside Story: An Irishman abroad

02:58, 23 December 2012 by Alex Meehan



Sam Neill at his vineyard: 'I find it very engrossing when I go out and labour in the fields.' Photo: Grahame Sydney

Best known for appearing in Hollywood blockbusters such as Jurassic Park and critically acclaimed dramas such as The Piano, Sam Neill is one of New Zealand's best-known big screen exports. So it may come as a surprise to some to learn that he is the proud holder of an Irish passport. Born in Omagh in 1947, Neill emigrated with his family to New Zealand in 1954, but he maintains a connection with Ireland and regularly visits here.

"Yes, I was born in Ireland," Neill says. "Technically speaking, I'm a New Zealander, but I was born in Ireland and I carry that passport with pride. I keep reasonably abreast of what's going on in Ireland and have friends here that we stay in touch with.

"I'm not an expert on current affairs or anything like that, so I think of myself as someone with Irish heritage rather than an Irishman. I'm not sentimental about it. I look upon those silly green hats that people wear on St Patrick's Day with some disdain."

With a string of hit films and TV shows under his belt, the veteran thesp has little left to prove when it comes to acting. Not bad for someone who started out with such erratic speech delay that he retreated into himself and became virtually mute in the company of adults.

"It was a social handicap for me, particularly in the company of grown-ups," he says. "I never spoke at all, and was completely silent for a long time. I'm not sure if the stutter is what started me acting, but I discovered early on that when I acted, I didn't stutter. I don't really stutter any more, but I have some actor friends who stutter badly as adults and they find that something magical happens when they walk on stage.

"The stutter disappears - who knows why? I know much more about the condition now, as an adult, because my daughter stutters. We took her to a speech therapist, because this is now a curable thing; it's not the lifelong affliction it was thought to be when I was small.

"The therapist asked us did my wife or I stutter. When I said I had as a child, the therapist said that wasn't surprising, because these things normally run in families, although it's much rarer now. After six months of treatment, she never stuttered again."

To date, Neill has acted in more than 100 films and TV shows, but is loath to say which is his favourite, "because someone's feelings



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Inside Story

Inside Story: An Irishman abroad



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will get hurt".

His first major screen role was as Damien Thorn, son of the devil, in the third Omen film and at one point, he was hotly tipped to succeed Roger Moore in the role of James Bond, losing out in the end to Timothy Dalton. International recognition came with Dead Calm in 1989, The Hunt for Red October in 1990, Jurassic Park and The Piano in 1993 and the cultish sci-fi film Event Horizon in 1997: "My Marmite movie: people either love it or detest it."

He was also offered a role in The Lord of the Rings but, due to scheduling conflicts, wasn't able to take it up.

"I was contractually obligated elsewhere and wasn't able to do it," he says. "I won't say which role, because I know the actor who got it so it would be in bad taste to say. I never regret these things though because there's always something else to do.

"In my career, I've lurched from doing arthouse films, to big movies to television series and back again, but always my main criteria for what I do next are that it will be quality and that I like the part."

In recent years, he's taken on more TV work, including a role in The Tudors as Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, which involved extensive shooting in Ireland. While here, he made a point of seeing more of the countryside, and in particular Newgrange made a big impression on him.

"There are some things of considerable profundity in Ireland that really interest me," Neill says. "The last time I was over and had some free time, I went to Newgrange, and that's an experience that has stayed with me.

"I take issue with people who call that a tomb - it's not that at all. It should be called a womb, not a tomb. I can't imagine anyone building a tomb like that when it obviously has a specific function. The sun penetrates into the back of that 'womb' and it's clear to me that it's all about the renewal of life and rebirth. It's an extraordinary place."

It's this aspect of the profound that Neill tries to find in his work, and that's something that has sometimes proved elusive.

"I'm always happy if a film or TV show I'm in is well received, but as an actor it seems a shame to me that some films don't get the attention I think they deserve," he says. "I was very pleased to do a film called Dean Spanley with Peter O'Toole and Jeremy Northam three or four years ago, but very few people have seen it.

"It's a very beautiful film, and I'm very proud of it. I regret it wasn't more successful, so if people see it in their local DVD shop, please pick it up."

Neill's most recent visit to Ireland was based around the launch of his Two Paddocks wine. He owns 30 acres of vineyard in the Central Otago region of New Zealand, where he produces a critically acclaimed pinot noir wine.

"Like acting, I didn't really mean to get involved in viticulture, but a series of accidents resulted in the thing coming together. I had no plan, it just happened," he says.

Lots of celebrities are associated with vineyards, but Neill is unusual in that his vineyard was built by him from scratch. He did it the hard way: buying land, planting grapes, tending his fields and then waiting to see what the result would be.

"I was walking down the street one day, and I ran into a friend who told me he'd found a couple of hundred acres he thought would be good to plant in grapes and would I like to come in on it," he says. "The idea was that I'd take 20 acres and plant pinot noir. I loved the idea of basing myself in New Zealand rather than in Los Angeles or London, so I did the deal. This was really serendipitous because Central Otago, where I live, has subsequently become an important pinot noir growing area.

"But this was 20 years ago, and it wasn't at the time. Back then, Rolfe Mills, who founded Rippon Vineyards, was starting to make really good pinot noir, and there were one or two other pioneers in Central Otago doing likewise, but it was far from clear that this was going to work. I saw that this was my opportunity.

"We used to holiday in the Central Otago region when I was a kid, and I've always been very fond of it, so this was the ideal opportunity to settle there. I planted five acres of pinot noir grapes in 1993, and really I just wanted to produce a good pinot noir that would, at the very least, be enjoyed by my family and friends. Frankly, my friends will pretty much drink anything, so this didn't seem too hard."



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Film director Roger Donaldson planted the land next door, which is how Two Paddocks got its name, and Neill began the wait to see if anything worthwhile would come of the effort.

As he starts to recall the moment when he and his wife opened the first vintage in 1997, he becomes animated, and it's clear he's talking about one of his life's great passions.

"The first surprise was that first bottle we opened, my wife and I," he says. "We were hoping it would be good, but to our delight we realised it wasn't just good, it was very good.

"The 1998 was a more distinguished wine, but in 1999, we made a wine that I really thought was world class. It was extraordinary and beautiful. It had considerable complexity with an amazing nose, delicious fruit and a good lengthy finish.

"Tasting that lit a fire of ungovernable ambition within me. Once you get bitten like that, there's no going back, unfortunately. The only negative about that year's vintage was that a full quarter of all our bottles were tainted by cork and since then we only use screw tops."

Today, that original five acres has turned into 30 acres spread across three vineyards and altogether Two Paddocks produces around 3,000 cases of wine a year made up of pinot noir, sauvignon blanc and riesling.

"Inevitably you get ambitious," he says. "When I realised that we were also producing really good pinot noir, I wanted to make more and I wanted to make the world's best pinot noir. That's what the goal has become over time."

Neill says that there's something about making wine that is deeply satisfying in a way that he just can't imagine would be the case with other processes.

"Take something like, say, Coca-Cola where it's the same thing each and every time it's made," he says. "Wine is different to that. It's about laying a foundation and then getting something that develops over time. That's one of the things I find really compelling - following the vintages as they grow up.

"The 2008, for instance, which is now available, was a vintage that we rather overlooked initially. But it's developed into something so beautiful, seductive and gorgeous that it took us all by surprise.

"Every vintage is different - every year, you are making an entirely different breathing, living thing. You guide the process, but you're never fully in charge of it. Nature has a hand to play, and you have no control over that.

"That's exaggerated with pinot noir - it will only really grow in a marginal area in a cool climate. We are much more at the mercy of the vagaries of the climate in New Zealand than someone growing, say, shiraz is."

For many A-listers, a vineyard is top of the list of ways to invest the money that comes with success. From Drew Barrymore and Dan Aykroyd to Antonio Banderas and Francis Ford Coppola, there are plenty of celebrity wines out there, but this is a label that Neill says brings him out in a rash.

"I absolutely dread the idea of making a celebrity wine," he says. "I've always insisted that the wine stands on its own and doesn't need me.

"And it's certainly good enough to do that. To be honest, I'm conflicted about promoting it on the back of whatever celebrity I have. But the manager of the brand insists every little bit helps, so he pushes me to do it, and I reconcile myself with that on the basis that maybe my name gets people to try it, and then it doesn't need me any more."

While the jobbing actor stays as involved as he can via laptops and smartphones while he's out of the country, it's actually working in the fields that he looks forward to when he gets home.

"I find it very engrossing when I go out and labour in the fields," he says. "It's an antidote to everything else I do. The feel of soil through the fingers is a wonderful thing when you love what you're doing.

"Most of the time when I'm away, I'm on email every day, so most decisions are at least run past me. But after 20 years, I've refined the system so that the seven or eight people who work for me are all good at what they do. I'm very happy with them and, in fact, they know more about their jobs at this point than I do."

Neill will next be on the small screen in the BBC's hotly-anticipated



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Downton Abbey meets Gangs of New York mini-series, Peaky Blinders.

The six-hour epic is set in the slums of Birmingham in 1919, where the eponymous Peaky Blinders gang play out a power struggle with the authorities.

Neill plays Police Chief CI Campbell, imported from Belfast to clean up a city terrorised by gang boss Tommy Shelby, played by Cillian Murphy in his first major TV role. Described as a gritty look at the underbelly of English society in the aftermath of World War I, Peaky Blinders is likely to be a major TV event in 2013, and the role of CI Campbell is one that Neill is excited to have been involved with.

We speak as he is winding up photography in late November, and he can't help but be enthusiastic about it.

"It was a violent and turbulent time and, best of all, it's based on a true story," he says. "The Peaky Blinders were a gang who wore razor blades stitched into the rims of their cloth caps and they'd use them to blind people who crossed them. They were hard men, and I play this very hard cop from Belfast.

"For me, it's important to work with actors I know and respect, and I'm working with a fantastic cast. Cillian Murphy from Cork and Helen McCrory are just great to work with, and I think this is going to be something special when it goes out on BBC Two."

The show is the first that Steven Knight of Dirty Pretty Things fame has written for TV, and the BBC publicity machine has already started to position it as a key offering for the year.

"I have at least one film to do next year and a television series, and we're also all crossing our fingers that there'll be more Peaky Blinders to do," says Neill. "I would say they'd be silly not to, but you never know. It's going to be a ripper."

In Ireland, Sam Neill's Two Paddocks pinot noir can be purchased from red nosewine.com and stockists nationwide

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A cosmopolitan background

Born in Omagh, Co Tyrone in 1947, Sam Neill is the son of a Harrow and Sandhurst-educated army officer who was a third generation New Zealander, and his English wife. At the time of Neill's birth, his father was temporarily stationed with the Irish Guards in the North back in the country that his grandparents had emigrated from in the 1880s.

In 1954, the Neill family returned to New Zealand, where Neill took to calling himself Sam while still at school - his given name is Nigel - and today he lives in Central Otago with his family. He has one son, Tim, with New Zealand actor Lisa Harrow and one daughter, Elena, with his wife, make-up artist Noriko Watanabe, as well as a step-daughter, Maiko, from Watanabe's first marriage.

He was made a Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit, but when knighthoods were returned to the New Zealand honours system in 2009 he declined a knighthood, saying the title of 'Sir' was "just too grand by far".

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The call of the wine

Sam Neill is unusual in being a hands-on winemaker, but not so unusual in lending his name to a vineyard. Indeed, acquiring an interest in a vineyard is one of the first investments actors, musicians and politicians with a taste for the good life make when the money starts to roll in.

At one end of the spectrum of involvement are wealthy types such as Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Johnny Depp and David Beckham, who purchase a vineyard as a status symbol and then produce wine for private consumption. At the other end are those that lend their names to a particular vintage in a commercial endorsement deal designed to boost sales.

Very few actually roll their sleeves up and get involved in the day-to-day running of a winery, preferring to have others do the work for them.

There are exceptions, however, and probably the best known is director Francis Ford Coppola, who comes from a wine-making family and whose California winery doubles as a working vineyard and a kind of Coppola theme park, where visitors can enjoy wine tastings while ogling the props from The Godfather.

Likewise, French star Gérard Depardieu owns wineries in several countries, and reportedly has his occupation listed on his passport as vigneron, or vineyard cultivator. Another with an interest in growing grapes is Madonna, who is involved in the Ciccone Vineyard in northern Michigan with her father.

Also involved are a growing coterie of heavy metal bands, among whom growing grapes has acquired fashionable status. Maynard James Keenan of heavy rock band Tool owns Merkin Vineyards in Arizona, while Motorhead, Slayer and AC/DC all lend their names to shiraz wines.

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