

# More than just James Bond: Sean Connery (1930-2020)

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The Scottish actor Sean Connery died in the Bahamas October 31 at the age of 90. He had been unwell for some time.

There was more to him than James Bond, but Connery will forever be identified with the spy. Connery cannot be held responsible for the Bond phenomenon, but the film franchise's initial success and subsequent durability owes much to the actor. Strikingly attractive and hard-edged, Connery's suave and imposing presence gave the character much of its authority. He chafed against overidentification with Bond, but the role continued to define him throughout his lengthy career.

Connery was notably blunt and hard-nosed, qualities which owed much to his working-class background. Born in Edinburgh, the son of Effie, a cleaner, and Joseph, a lorry driver and factory worker, he left school at 14, and took a job at a local milk co-operative. After three years he joined the navy.

Invalidated out of the navy in 1949, aged 19, he returned to the co-op, then worked a round of manual jobs, driving lorries and labouring on building sites. He later said there was "nothing special about being an actor. It's a job like being a bricklayer."

Connery was also training with a former army gym instructor and competing in bodybuilding contests. A tall man, 6'2", he acquired a reputation as a tough individual who refused to be cowed by local thugs.

The serious attitude to his impressive physique led to him modelling at the Edinburgh College of Art, where artist Richard Demarco described him as "a virtual Adonis."

He went to London in 1953 for a bodybuilding competition. Learning that there were parts available, he joined the chorus line in a production of *South Pacific*. A year later he was playing the role of Lieutenant Buzz Adams.

Encouraged by American actor Robert Henderson, Connery educated himself in the theatrical classics, reading Shakespeare, Ibsen and Shaw. He also took elocution lessons to refine his accent into what would become one of cinema's most distinctive voices.

Connery quickly started to get work. It is hardly surprising that this tall, muscular man with a regional accent found work playing gangsters, in films like *Hell Drivers* (Cy Endfield, 1957) and *Frightened City* (John Lemont, 1961), but there were also signs of the positive impact of his self-education.

British television's production of serious drama throughout the 1960s, both in new writing and classical productions, encouraged Connery's scope as an actor. He appeared in substantial work by John Millington Synge, Jean Anouilh, Arthur Miller (John Proctor

in *The Crucible*), and Leo Tolstoy (Vronsky in *Anna Karenina*). There were also forays into Shakespeare, playing Macbeth for a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation production, and, most successfully, playing Hotspur in the BBC's cycle of Shakespeare's history plays.

What changed everything, for better or worse, was getting the part of Bond in the first picture based on Ian Fleming's novels, *Dr No* (Terence Young, 1962), which also featured Ursula Andress.

Connery's working-class muscularity and bluntness were not the sophisticated ruling-class hero envisaged by Fleming, who was playing out his Cold War chauvinist and triumphalist fantasies and thinking ideally of David Niven: "I'm looking for Commander Bond and not an overgrown stuntman."

Producer Albert R. Broccoli saw Connery's physicality as key. "I wanted a ballsy guy... Put a bit of veneer over that tough Scottish hide and you've got Fleming's Bond." Young took responsibility for that veneer, with actress Lois Maxwell saying the director "took [Connery] to dinner, showed him how to walk, how to talk, even how to eat."

*Dr No* was a popular success, although critical reactions were not so enthusiastic. Director François Truffaut, for example, thought the film "marked the beginning of the period of decadence in cinema... For the first time throughout the world, mass audiences were exposed to a type of cinema that relates neither to life nor to any romantic tradition but only to other films and always by sending them up."

That became more pronounced as the series progressed, building on what Connery had brought to the role. Connery made the first five Bond films—*From Russia With Love* (1963), *Goldfinger* (1964), *Thunderball* (1965), *You Only Live Twice* (1967) being the others—but they were becoming increasingly formulaic and repetitive.

Connery found the attentions of overnight superstardom unwelcome, and was reluctant to accept the stereotyping, as his non-Bond work during this period indicates. Among the more interesting pieces were Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964), one of the director's better late films (Truffaut described it as "the last picture to reveal Hitchcock's deepest emotions"), and *The Hill* (1965), the first of five films with Sidney Lumet. In *The Hill*, Connery played a mutinous inmate of a brutal British military prison camp in wartime north Africa.

The other four Lumet-Connery collaborations were *The Anderson Tapes* (1971), *The Offence* (1973), *Murder on the Orient*

*Express* (1974) and *Family Business* (1989). A commentator at *Film Stories* recently asserted that “Lumet fulfilled Connery’s desire to be challenged and treated seriously as an actor. In return, Connery afforded Lumet creative freedom from financiers by putting his star power behind his projects, even if their commercial prospects were mixed.”

*Woman of Straw* (Basil Dearden, 1964) and *A Fine Madness* (Irvin Kershner, 1966) were also worthwhile efforts featuring Connery in the 1960s.

There was also evidence of a rebellious—or at least critical—streak in the actor. In 1967 he made his only directorial venture, a documentary on attempts to introduce new managerial practices on the Clydeside shipyards. In Martin Ritt’s *The Molly Maguires* (1970) he played an Irish immigrant miner in Pennsylvania taking retaliatory action against the exploitative coal company.

That film’s box office failure was one factor in Connery’s agreement to return as Bond when Peter R. Hunt’s *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* (1969) was unable to prevent the franchise’s developing trend towards gimmicky flash. *Diamonds Are Forever* (Guy Hamilton, 1971) marks a further decline towards the lightweight nonsense of the later films, but Connery had already stamped his mark. Critic Roger Ebert said “Basically, you have Connery, and then you have all the rest.”

Connery, however, demonstrated his independence, if not any critical acumen. He was given upfront a US \$1 million fee, which he donated to an educational charity he had established to help deprived Scottish children, paid a weekly salary of US \$10,000 and given a promise of financing for two films of his choice.

One was Lumet’s *The Offence* (1973), although its box office failure meant no second film was made. Here he played a brutal policeman undergoing a nervous breakdown after a suspect dies from a police beating.

Connery had some depth, and sometimes seemed fascinated by the psychological and emotional impact of violence. This is not always healthy. In 1964 Connery’s then wife Diane Cilento encouraged him to visit controversial psychologist R.D. Laing in an effort to deal with the demands of his stardom. Laing’s session involved giving Connery a tab of LSD and trying to probe childhood traumas.

Cilento later said she thought that “with his enormous reserves and physical armouring, Sean resisted the drug,” but he was deeply affected by the session. Cilento claimed that Connery beat her on several occasions. He denied this strongly, although he also told interviewers he thought it was acceptable to slap a woman to “keep her in line.”

This provocative and backward remark has occasioned numerous media denunciations following his death: “Don’t canonise Sean Connery—he was a coward and a bully,” “Have we all forgotten the dark side of Sean Connery?” Connery is not around to defend himself, but even if it happened that he was not always a pleasant person and could even be a “bully,” this does not justify the *Independent*’s stupid, self-serving column, “Johnny Depp, Sean Connery, Oscar Pistorius—why our attachment to ‘brilliant’ men is so dangerous for women.” The article, in the #MeToo vein, irresponsibly amalgamates Pistorius, who shot his girlfriend four times, with Depp, embroiled in bitter court battles with his former

wife, Amber Heard, and Connery.

Whatever Connery’s failings, as an artist he deserves to be judged by artistic standards.

In any event, leaving Bond behind did allow Connery to take more mature roles. Connery made some genuinely valuable films in this period, including John Huston’s *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975) alongside Michael Caine, and *Robin and Marian* (Richard Lester, 1976) as an aging Robin Hood renewing his love for Maid Marian (Audrey Hepburn). Visually arresting and deeply eccentric, John Boorman’s *Zardoz* (1974) is not a particularly good film, but compelling in some ways.

After this, his film choices sometimes looked to be driven solely by mercenary calculations, as with his final return as Bond. The very title *Never Say Never Again* (Irvin Kershner, 1983) seemed an astutely cynical comment on his decision.

These films only sometimes paid off for the viewer, although Connery was usually worth watching. He was well cast as Major General Roy Urquhart in Richard Attenborough’s *A Bridge Too Far* (1977), his cameo in Terry Gilliam’s *Time Bandits* (1981) is charming and he lends pleasing authority (and uncertain Irish accent) to Brian de Palma’s *The Untouchables* (1987). There were interesting performances as the defecting Soviet submarine commander in *The Hunt for Red October* (John McTiernan, 1990) and William de Baskerville in Jean-Jacques Annaud’s adaptation of Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1986), amongst others.

He finally decided to retire after the dreadful *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Stephen Norrington, 2003), which he called “a nightmare.” He later said he was “sick of the idiots now making films in Hollywood.”

All too often his resolute independence looked more like a purely business consideration. He had a reputation for hard bargaining, and a history of litigation against studios and former accountants. There was something bitter and misanthropic at work here, as in his view “to get anywhere in life you have to be antisocial. Otherwise you’ll end up being devoured.”

In politics he gave this commercial hardness a romantic veneer, supporting Scottish independence and the pro-business Scottish National Party (SNP). Notwithstanding the SNP’s ostensible republicanism, Connery accepted a knighthood in 2000.



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