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# Plantation road

**Gaiutra Bahadur** follows her family history to the shores of Guyana and the Highlands of Scotland

The last time my guide was here, at this particular bend of the River Cassley in the Highlands, he was a boy working as a beater, startling birds out of bushes so hunters could sight their prey. I have come to this remote corner of Scotland, in the county of Sutherland, a place with almost as many sheep as people, on a peculiar pilgrimage. The government declared 2009 the year of homecoming, to attract descendants of emigrant Scots as heritage tourists. I am not a tourist, however. I'm a writer on book research, and the heritage I am here to explore isn't marketed much to visitors: Scotsmen from this rugged area were the earliest speculators in sugar plantations in the West Indies, where they exploited first slaves, then the indentured servants who were my ancestors, in order to conjure their fortunes from the fields.

Seeing for the first time the place they fled, it's as though I've found an umbilical cord through time connecting me to a motherland I never knew existed. It's surreal. The wild, fir-covered hills around me are very real, however, and picturesque. For over a century, they have been a holiday shooting ground for the rich. In the 1880s, the tourist guide *The Highland Sportsman* praised the salmon fishing in the Cassley and the surrounding 1,000 hectares of game (grouse! red deer! roe deer! woodcocks! snipe!). The book also praised the Georgian mansion on the estate, set in "very fine wooded scenery" with "charming walks and drives". The house is still here, and the charm, too. But cracks now grow from its roof, and red vines of neglect from its high stone walls, uninhabited for 40 years.

The house is locked and empty, except for a rust-red cart I spy in a front room, with the name of the estate embossed on it in big, bold letters: "ROSEHALL". The name was also spray-painted, proprietorially, all over lumber stacked nearby. Written repeatedly on the grounds like that, the word had started to acquire a mantra-like magic. It also rang with a strange intimacy, because I knew it from my childhood half a world away in Berbice, a rural province of Guyana, the former British colony at the northern tip of South America. I was born there and, until moving to the US at the age of six, lived in a village a little more than 3km from a plantation called Rose Hall. My father lived there before me, and my grandfather before him. For four generations, relatives have worked amid the plantation's knife-sharp leaves of sugarcane. My great-grandmother, Sujaria, was the first.

In the summer of 1903, at the age of 27, she climbed aboard a sailing ship called *The Clyde*, docked in Calcutta's Hooghly River but named after a river in Scotland. She immigrated to Guyana, then known as British Guiana, as an indentured servant, one of the half-million Indians who succeeded slaves in the West Indies after abolition. They were mainly peasants at their last resource, some recruited honestly – but some tricked or kidnapped – into five-to-seven year work contracts. The British government paid for their passage, in cargo holds below deck, to the West Indies. Their wages were so paltry, with so much that was financially punitive in the fine print that many became indebted and repeatedly had to renew their contracts. Historians have called the system, in place from 1838 to 1917, "a new form of slavery". Sujaria was indentured to Rose Hall, where she lived, like all indentured servants, in communal barracks in the part of the plantation called "the nigger yard".

This curve of coast, strung with inlets the colour of lapis lazuli, is like a necklace of blue. Pretty, but cool to the touch. Mountain pastures and forests that used to be timber plantations encircle Rosehall. But it's the heath, exposed to winds that blow hard and chilly, that makes an impression. In Berbice, women go on Sunday strolls with parasols to shield them from



House of Fraser, Guyana (top). Courtesy: Gaiutra Bahadur. Glen Cassley, Scotland (below, left). Rachel Husband / Alamy. Rosehall in Sutherland, Scotland (bottom). Courtesy: Laura Hughes



the equatorial sun, and wooden houses shaded by coconut palms stand on stilts to avoid the mud underfoot. The Atlantic touches Berbice in silty, brown embraces that don't attract sunbathers; its marshy coastal strip is laid out in rows of sugarcane rather than beach umbrellas. Few tourists dare to tread, because it is poor and dangerous terrain. Other West Indians have been known to snub it: "Dat place? Dat place behind God back". The two landscapes, whatever their differences, have a magnificence in common that comes from the sense of being stranded at the ends of the earth.

Maybe, when fortune-seeking sons from the best families in this stretch of the Highlands first went to Guyana two centuries ago, they saw something in Berbice, the backwaters of a backwater, that struck a chord. A tight, interlocking network of men from the Inver-

ness area – all from the same few clans – built Berbice's plantations. In the thick of it was George Baillie, a son of the laird of Rosehall. He bought and sold plantations with the frenzy of a Wall Street day trader. Land records for Plantation Rose Hall don't exist before 1815, which was Baillie's heyday, but my guide guesses he owned it.

Where did my Rose Hall get its name? The answer lies at some obscure point beyond memory and record-keeping, but everywhere around the Scottish Rosehall, the landscape suggests its parentage. My guide, the once-upon-a-time beater, is Highlands Councilman David Alston, a historian and an expert on the links between this part of the Highlands, his part, and that part of Guyana, my part. His guess is the best there is. As we drove to the estate, we passed traffic signs bearing names I remember from Guyana: Tain. Tarlogie.

## A long journey home



Source: Google

Alness. Fyrish. Kildonian. All were once plantations in Berbice, and towns there still bear those names. In fact, 30 names on the map here have been reproduced in Berbice. With every signpost, I saw Scotland more and more as a motherland. It was, after all, a Scotsman who conceived the plan to replace slaves with indentured Indians: John Gladstone, a planter in Guiana and father of former British Prime Minister William Gladstone.

At least six different Frasers from here made Berbice their planters' playground, giving their name to slaves they owned and children they fathered, so much so that there still stands in Guyana a landmark mansion known as the House of Fraser. Light and airy, with 101 windows, it's nothing like the stone-solid Rosehall mansion, except for an air of grandeur. It was built near a plantation called Albion (Alba is Gaelic for Scotland).

I had come to Rosehall on the trail of one particular Scot who had left his name behind in my own village: the overseer George William Sutherland. According to a British government dossier, marked "confidential" when compiled in 1930, Sutherland had had affairs with several different Indian women on Plantation Rose Hall. One of them had a son, whom she christened George William Sutherland, Jr. He grew up in my village, and my entire family knew him. They remember him as tall, thin, light-skinned, with a reputation as a brawler.

When I arrived in Scotland, I didn't know precisely where Sutherland the Father was from. Transatlantic ship manifests led me to

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the answer: he was born to a shepherd near the Rosehall mansion in the Highlands. He returned there to settle down and, after decades of philandering in Berbice, to marry a Scottish woman at 51. An old woman from the area remembers him as "thin, tallish... a nice-looking man". Emigration was once so central to the Scottish soul that none less than Robert Burns, its lionized poet, almost went to a West Indies plantation as bookkeeper. (The recent novel *Illustrious Exile* speculates: what if Burns had gone? It's set partly in Guyana.) Gone are the days when the chief export of the Highlands was its people. Tourism, bred of the majestically solitary expanses created by all that unpeopling, now anchors the economy.

The men who made money by leaving Scotland have been replaced by men who sell coming to Scotland: impresarios like Harrod's proprietor Mohamed al Fayed, who owns some of the old Rosehall land. On the grounds he rents cottages that cost US\$800 (Dh2,940) per night, where you can still stalk roe deer in the tradition of *The Highland Sportsman*. Holidaymakers can also stop by his Falls of Shin Visitor Centre to sample the Robbie Burns Chicken, stuffed with haggis and served with whisky sauce. At the entrance stands a wax statue of al Fayed in a kilt. The Egyptian-born businessman, a latter-day laird, has adopted the Highland heritage as his own; he likes to say that Scotland gets its name from Scota, an Egyptian princess who chanced on it with her army 3,600 years ago.

As for the Rosehall mansion, it was recently bought by Muhammed Sayeed Chowdhury, a Brit who wants to convert its 20 derelict rooms into an exclusive club trading on the glamour of a past resident. Coco Chanel came here in the 1920s with the mansion's owner, the Duke of Westminster. She decorated their love nest in her trademark beiges; it is apparently the only British house with a Chanel interior. But when Chowdhury markets the mansion, he might do well to also highlight its little-known, other history: how, somehow, it gave its name to misbegotten places, while the West Indies planters who owned it were on youthful adventures abroad.

● Gaiutra Bahadur is an American writer at work on a book about indentured labour in the West Indies