

1898 historical background of the movie

Our naturalist reports to the new U.S. authorities on the Flora and Fauna of Puerto Rico: its contextual ethnography—the geological origins of the Island, the fate of its Taino inhabitants, then the African runaway slaves and the ruined European coffee farmers—and his dream of a Museum of Natural History to house his incomparable collection of watercolors, specimens, and preColumbian artifacts.

This the story behind Stahl's short essay on the Flora & Fauna of Puerto Rico, written at the request of Dr. Henry K. Carroll and included in the latter's 1898 Report on the Island of Porto Rico, a study commissioned by President Wm. McKinley to decide the exchange rate of peso to the dollar and make recommendations as to the future status of the Island.

The movie, based on his writings and watercolors, opens with Dr. Carroll's request and tells the story of our foremost naturalist recalling his adventures of the River that runs thru the Rain Forest. How was the Island first formed? What do we know of its plants and animals? What of its first inhabitants? In this journey for new knowledge the naturalist stumbles on a missing link, a woodsman, a snake trapper, a Man of the Forest, who for years has harbored a half-burned diary, unable to read it, being illiterate as 90 percent of his fellow Islanders. In a Cave of Origins the Man of the Forest has Stahl unearth a buried treasure of indian artifacts—cemis, amulets, stone belts, ocarinas—remnants from a forgotten antiquity. Reading the scorched diary entries Stahl unearths still another forgotten world. A family of coffee farmers, their personal trials mirrored in the context of key events in the history of the Island (the Cédula de Gracias in the twenties, the Régimen de la Libreta in the forties, and the Lares Rebellion in the sixties).

It is a tale of broken dreams and eternal hope. Not unlike how the film ends— with a plead to Dr. Carroll by Stahl expressing his desire and permanent dream: to house his valuable collection of flora, fauna and indian artifacts in a Museum of Natural History of Puerto Rico—today, Stahl's dream museum (shared by a growing number of scientists, artists, educators and institutions for over a hundred years) continues to be the impossible dream.