Ponce de Leon, Pizarro, and Spanish Colonies

Juan Ponce de Leon heard the stories of Cortes and his great success. He believed he, too, could find kingdoms of gold, and he thought he knew just where to look.
Ponce de Leon had come to the New World with Columbus, but he was different than Columbus: he was tougher. Some say he was bloodthirsty and cruel, but he was also brave and generous. He gave most of his money to charity.
Ponce de Leon was related to Spanish kings. He was a page in the royal court of Spain when he set out to find adventure in the New World. On the island of Puerto Rico he found more than adventure: he found gold. He conquered Puerto Rico, became its governor, and made a fortune in gold, slaves, and land.
But Ponce de Leon wasn’t finished exploring. He heard tales from the Indians of a magical spring that cured illnesses and made old men and women young again. He set out to find that Fountain of Youth.
He failed to find it. Instead, in 1513, Ponce de Leon discovered a new land. The new land, which was North America, was filled with beautiful flowers. Ponce de Leon called it La Florida. In Spanish, Florida means “flowery.”
But Ponce de Leon still wasn’t satisfied. He wanted to surpass Cortes. He wanted to find something even greater than Montezuma’s kingdom of gold, and he was convinced he would find it in Florida. In 1521 the king commissioned him to conquer and colonize “the island of Florida.” (No one knew it was more than an island.) Ponce de Leon set out from Puerto Rico with two ships, 200 men, and 50 horses. Unfortunately for him, all he found in Florida were Indians who shot poisoned arrows. One arrow entered Ponce de Leon’s thigh, and the poison began to work. When that happened, his men fled from Florida back to Cuba, where the tough explorer died. He was buried under a stone that says, “Here lies the bones of the lion.” (In Spanish, Leon means “lion.”)
However, Ponce de Leon was right. There was another kingdom of gold – it just didn’t happen to be in Florida. Francisco Pizarro headed down the west coast of South America and found golden treasures beyond anything anyone had ever imagined. He found them in Peru.
Pizarro’s capture of Peru, in 1532, was perhaps the most daring and terrible of all the Spanish conquests. With just 180 men, 67 horses, and three big, noisy guns, Pizarro defeated the powerful Inca Empire.
When Pizarro arrived in the Inca capital, Cuzco, he captured the ruler, who was known as the Grand Inca. Pizarro promised to release the Inca, whose name was Atahualpa, if his followers would fill a huge room with gold. They did, but Pizarro killed Atahualpa anyway.
As you can see, Pizarro and his men were not exactly honorable. In fact, they were deceitful and treacherous. Soon they were fighting among themselves for gold and power. They ended up killing each other. Pizarro was killed, too. Some say Atahualpa’s ghost got revenge on Pizarro. Things go so bloody that finally the king of Spain took over. He didn’t mind at all. Spain was going to grow rich on the gold and silver from the mines in Peru.
Sometimes historians say they want to cry when they think of Pizarro’s conquest. Remember that room the Incas filled with gold? Well, it wasn’t just gold. It included beautiful jewelry and carvings of animals and birds and decorated plates and spoons – the artwork of a civilization. There was a silver Alpaca that was saved. But much more was not. Pizarro melted down all the gold into bars. It was lost to history forever.
The Spaniards did that kind of thing many times over. Their religion told them the Indian civilization was pagan and therefore false, and that its symbols should be destroyed. Because they believed their religion was the only true religion, they thought they were doing the right thing when they forced it on others. Spain and the other European nations had guns, powerful crossbows, ships that could sail into the wind, and printing presses that made the exchange of ideas easy. Sometimes they acted as if that strength gave them the right to bully other peoples. Some Europeans said, “Might makes right.” Many Spaniards believed that their nation was best because it was strongest. A few people questioned those ideas, but most did not. When leaders say something is all right, most people agree, without thinking for themselves.

Answer the following questions after reading and thinking about Ponce de Leon, Pizarro, and Spanish Colonies.

1. Where did Ponce de Leon explore, what was he looking for and what did he find?

2. How did Florida get its name?

3. How did Ponce de Leon die?

4. Where did Francisco Pizarro explore, what was he looking for and what did he find?

5. Why do we know Pizarro and his men were deceitful and treacherous?

6. How did Francisco Pizarro die?

7. Why did Pizarro and his men melt down Inca artwork?

8. What did the Spanish think about themselves and their religion?

9. What does the phrase “Might makes right” mean?