



Left: Alice Wedega, MBE; **below left:** as a girl of 16 at Kwato; **below right:** Alice (standing) with fellow Kwato missionaries, Panai Loea and Nora

Alice Wedega

Alice Wedega, in her seventy-seventh year, now lives quietly in suburban Port Moresby. But inside her frail frame the light which made her a giant among women still burns brightly. Eric Johns — a schoolteacher in Papua New Guinea for 13 years until 1973 — traces the story of Alice Wedega, missionary, teacher, expeditionary, nurse, internationalist, welfare worker, moral rearmament activist and politician.



ALICE, second eldest of four brothers and three sisters, was born at Alo Alo village, Milne Bay Province, in 1905. Her father, Wedega Gamahari, was a London Missionary Society pastor before resigning to become a copra farmer. Her whole family was solidly Christian.

When she was six, Alice was sent to Kwato, an island in the China Straits off the southeastern end of New Guinea, where LMS missionaries had set up a station in 1891. Alice's first task was to help mind the babies of her Aunt Bessie. She stayed on at Kwato to complete Standard Six schooling and then undertake a course in domestic studies under the instruction of the wife of Charles Abel, one of the founders of the Kwato mission. For three years she studied sewing, cooking and craft.

It was not long before the taught became teacher. In 1932, when Alice was involved in the training of young girls, she had her horizons momentarily broadened when she was taken on a three-month holiday in Australia by the wife of the manager of Burns Philp's operations on Samarai, an island three kilometres from Kwato.

In 1935 Alice Wedega began her first field work as a missionary. She was a member of a party of 15 Kwato people — including another woman, Panai Loea, and Cecil Abel (Charles's son) — which went to the Cloudy Bay area near Abau. Two tribes, the Dorewaide and the Keveli, were fighting each other so often their numbers were diminishing. Patrol officers were jailing killers but the fighting continued. The Kwato expedition was in response to an official appeal for help.

Against the advice of a patrol officer, the Kwato party went into the troubled area without a police guard. Amau was the first village it visited. Alice remembers that the

villagers, members of the Dorewaide tribe, who were enjoying a feast, were taken by surprise but the visitors were able to talk their way into having a house set aside for them to sleep in.

That night the missionaries held a prayer meeting but few villagers attended. However, when the people saw there were no guns or police around, they became more trusting. Alice recalls that the Amau chief, Belea, said his son, Maeau, was away killing someone. But when Maeau returned he was persuaded to join the the Kwato party when it moved on to the next village, Kulondi.

When the party got to Kulondi the villagers ran into the bush. The interpreter called out: 'This is not a patrol. These are missionaries who have come to see you.' Slowly, says Alice, the Kulondi people



re-emerged and finally the party was made welcome. But, as at Amau, they were unable to convince the people that the fighting should stop.

In all, the Kwato party visited five villages. One representative from each village was persuaded to accompany the missionaries back to the coast. There it was discovered that the five were either chiefs or sons of chiefs. They were taken to Kwato where, says Alice, they were quickly converted to Chris-

Right: Alice, 76, at her suburban Port Moresby home; **left from top:** Kwato missionaries in the 1920s; all Keveli men except the Dorewaide man third from left, jailed in the mid-1930s at Abau for killing, enjoyed the food and conditions of jail and were welcomed home as heroes on their release; Alice (centre) and fellow delegates to the New Zealand pan-Pacific conference on the role of women in 1953



tianity. Then they returned to their villages where they were successful in putting an end to the conflict between the Dorewaide and the Keveli.

Even better was to come. One Keveli man who owned a lot of good gardening land on the plains invited both Keveli and Dorewaide to go and live on it. They did so. The Kwato missionaries then built a school and aid post at Amau. Alice, who by this time knew the people well, was asked to take charge of the school.

She remained at Amau until the Pacific War began when all missionary women were taken back to Kwato for their safety. Alice was at Milne Bay when the Japanese came.

All European missionaries (except Cecil Abel who joined the army) went to Australia. Alice remembers watching from Duabo as foreigner fought foreigner in her country. Wounded Australian and American troops were nursed at Duabo and later at Kwato by Alice and other missionaries.

After the war Alice returned to Amau where she taught children English and Police Motu (the lingua franca for much of the Papua region of PNG) by day; Police Motu and Suau (the language of a bible translation) to adults by night.

Her stay at Amau this time was short. In 1946 she return-

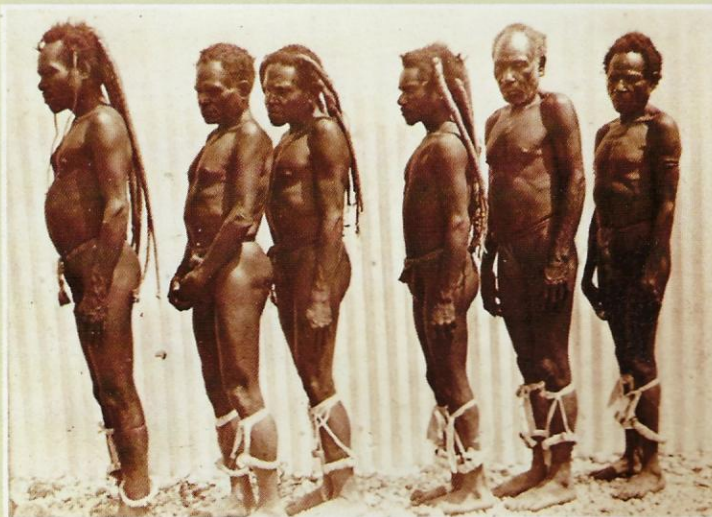
ed to Kwato to help establish and develop other schools. By now Alice Wedega was regarded as one of the LMS's key missionaries and, in 1952, along with four other LMS members, was invited to attend a Moral Rearmament Conference in Bombay.

The visit to India had a profound impact on Alice. She says that the great poverty of millions of Indians convinced her that her own people were so much better off. At least they all had gardens.

In 1953 Alice Wedega travelled around the Milne Bay area recounting her experiences. In the same year she went to New Zealand as the sole PNG delegate to a pan-Pacific conference on the role of women.

In those days Australia was the colonial authority in Papua New Guinea and in New Zealand Alice was critical of Australia's failure to provide government schools in her country. She was told by other delegates that their respective colonial administrations were providing schools. On her return to Papua New Guinea she spread the word about schooling in other Pacific countries. At the same time she pointed up the poor living conditions imposed on village women in Papua New Guinea.

Alice Wedega became a





public figure and in 1955 she was asked by Lady Cleland, wife of the then Australian Administrator, Sir Donald Cleland, to train in Port Moresby as a girl guide captain so that she could promote the movement in Milne Bay.

Alice studied for three months at the Guide House in Konedobu, a Port Moresby suburb, and then, after passing her final test, returned to Milne Bay where she was successful in developing the guiding movement.

In 1956 three government trawlers were sent to Milne Bay to take new guides to Port Moresby for a countrywide jamboree. Soon after, Alice was made guide commissioner for Milne Bay.

But her activities were not confined just to guiding. In 1958 Alice was employed by the department of agriculture to help improve gardening in Milne Bay. The department was trying to eradicate 'slash and burn' agriculture. Because women do most of the farming in Milne Bay, Alice was used as the bridge between them and agricultural officers.

In 1960 Alice was involved in the development of a training centre at Ahiona, Milne Bay. As an employee of the welfare department, she taught young women cooking, sewing, hygiene, native crafts and how to run their own clubs. In the first year the centre was attended by 68 students from all over Papua New Guinea. Alice worked at the centre until she retired from missionary work in 1968.

In 1961 Alice was nominated by the Administrator as a member of the last Legislative Council before universal franchise was introduced. A year later she was awarded the MBE in recognition of her contribution to the improvement in the lot of women.

There was to be no rest for Alice on retirement. In 1969 she was sent to Bougainville by

the colonial government to try to help solve the conflict which had developed over the decision to develop the Panguna copper mine.

Alice, as might have been expected, was more concerned about the problems of women in the villages and, after working there for two months in 1969, she returned in 1970 for a further 10 months.

At first, she said, no one on Bougainville would take any notice of her. She was called 'redskin' by the much darker Bougainvillean people. But gradually, she recalls, she won the women over and then their husbands after they had tasted the cooking she had introduced. She taught the women weaving, how to build an oven from a 44-gallon drum and

how to bake bread, buns, scones and other food.

Then Alice was travelling internationally again as a Moral Rearmament activist. She visited about a dozen European countries and lectured in many places on her work as a missionary and the conditions of women in PNG.

Alice Wedega had always resented the subservient role women were expected to play

by their menfolk. She believed they should not be left out of public or private decision-making and should be given greater educational opportunities so that they could contribute to the development of Papua New Guinea. Her aim has always been to see women stand as equals alongside their husbands.

Bob Hawkins writes: Alice Wedega had just had an eye operation when I visited her at her Korobosea home last August. But while her image of

me may not have been so clear, there was nothing uncertain about her view of today's Papua New Guinea. She is sternly critical of the level of debate in the National Parliament in which can be seen many similarities to the Australian system from which it was born. Says Alice: 'When I was in Legco we didn't argue very much. We simply listened, made notes and then went away and thought about it. We made our replies later. Nowadays the politicians get up and argue and argue and argue . . .' Alice still espouses her views with conviction. You will soon be able to read them in her autobiography which she has called *Listen, My Country*. ✎

Alice Wedega, politician, addresses the colonial Legislative Council in 1961, with 'old territorial' and fellow Legco member Ivan Champion looking on

