



Missionary work in the Pacific islands was, and still is, a major pre-occupation of the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand. The New Hebrides in particular saw a constant stream of missionaries from New Zealand. The islanders were considered to be heathens and practices such as cannibalism and burying wrongdoers alive needed to be reformed.

One such missionary was the Rev. Peter Milne, and he like all of them, needed to have respite in New Zealand from time to time. On one such furlough he was involved in the translation and printing of several portions of scripture and other books for the use of the natives of Nguna (now Vanuatu) and other islands of the New Hebrides group, with costs of the scripture translation being met by the Otago Bible Society with the concurrence of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and the costs of the other books being funded by the sale of arrowroot of a very superior kind, manufactured by the natives under the superintendence of Mr Milne.

Lei-Wia accompanied the Milnes on their second furlough to Dunedin in 1889 as nurse to their children. Her husband, Atavitaku, and at least 3 other relatives also made the trip. Born c. 1864 Lei- Wia, from the village of Tanoropo, was the daughter of Matakokoale, an

important Chief on the New Hebridean Island of Nguna described by the missionaries in 1879 as 'The High Chief above others - a quiet, cheerful old man'. Matakoale was transformed by Christianity from a fierce cannibal and polygamist to teacher, elder and finally a minister in the church on his Island. After years of being unhelpful and sometimes aggressive toward the Missionaries struggling to convert his people, he finally attended a church service on August 11 1878, 5 months after the end of a tribal war between the bush and shore people on Nguna, along with his traditional enemies the 'Shore Chiefs' Tariliu and Marawota. Soon after Matakoale 'put away' 9 of his 10 wives retaining his first and built a house within the Mission compound. From there he attended church and school regularly and learned to read and write. Matakoale's conversion represented a new beginning for the people of Nguna.

During this furlough the family suffered a great loss in 1891 by the death of Lei-Wia, who had been a nurse to the Milne children for a number of years, and of much good influence among the women of Nguna.

In February 1891 she caught a severe cold, and when that was cured had a severe attack of sciatica. She was ailing off and on, and was attended very kindly by Dr Coughtrey. Persistent diarrhoea set in and pernicious anaemia from which she died at Roslyn on July 20, 1891. Eight days before she died the Rev. John McNeill came to see her before he left Dunedin. He sang "Jesus Loves Me" to her and she joined in. She had risen from her bed to wait for his coming; when he left she went back to bed and did not leave it again.

Lei-Wia is buried in Dunedin's Northern Cemetery, where a lovely tombstone and railing were afterwards erected at the grave, the cost of which (13 pounds 13 shillings) was given by the Young People's Christian Band of Kaikorai Presbyterian Church.

In March/ April of 2008. Men from Nguna arrived at the Northern Cemetery on a quest to find the grave of Lei-Wia whom they consider to be a Princess. They told us Lei-Wia had been gifted by her father Matakoale to the shore Chief Marawota who in turn had given her to the Reverend Peter Milne as a gift for his part in bringing peace to their Island. Lei-Wia resided in the Mission compound and married Atavitaku in 1882. She assisted Mrs Mary Milne in her house and as nurse to her children.

Her people from Nguna had not forgotten her and on finding her burial place attended it with great reverence. They later returned and filmed the Northern Cemetery gravesite and told us her story saying they would show the film on their home Island and do so with great celebration.

Prepared by the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand (www.cemeteries.org.nz) from information held by the Southern Heritage Trust, Presbyterian Church Archives, and from the Otago Witness, Issue 1967, 5 November 1891, Page 16 in the PapersPast website.