

OCEANIA: WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT?

An American Opinion

By GILBERT CANT in *Asia and the Americas*, December, 1943

Gilbert Cant, was editor of the *New York Post*, toured the Pacific war area for several months on an assignment for *Asia and the Americas* and the *New York Post*.

WAR in the Pacific has created a new continent of Oceania, which is destined to play an important part, when peace is restored, in the lives of the peoples of four other continents—Australasia, Asia, and the two Americas.

It may be argued that Oceania has always existed. But in the past it has been so unorganized as to remind one of the schoolboys' definition of a net: 'A lot of holes tied together with pieces of string.' If anything, Oceania was even less coherent. It consisted of a myriad pinpoints of land, separated by water. An island might lie within a few miles of one of the world's great trade routes, and yet be as remote from commercial or social intercourse with civilization as though it had been on another planet.

It was natural, indeed almost inevitable, that Oceania should be the Cinderella of the continents. It differs from all other continents in the extreme diffusion of its habitable areas. Many thousand of its islands are so small that they cannot be considered land masses; they have position, but only negligible length and breadth. Even in the aggregate, their area is less than that of Borneo or New Guinea.

On such minute specks of land, lacking mineral resources, major commercial enterprise was impossible. And Oceania differed from all other continents, except Australasia, in another vital respect: labour was either absent or, in most sections, so reluctant that it might as well have been absent.

As late as 1940 and 1941 it was found necessary to import Gilbertese and Ellice-Islanders to work coconut plantations and guano diggings in the Phoenix Islands. In a few decades it has been deemed necessary to import cotton and sugar plantation workers from India to

the Fijis in such profusion that they now total about 100,000, approximately equal in number to the natives of the islands.

If the vast, heterogeneous area of Oceania had been under a single political administration the physical handicaps might have been overcome, and it might have been developed economically and socially at about the same rate as other remote areas of the world. But the political map of Oceania is a crazy-quilt.

My definition of Oceania excludes all those islands or groups of islands which are natural extensions of other continental land masses (the Aleutians, the Kuriles, Formosa), and those which are large enough to constitute reasonably self-sustaining political and economic sovereignties (Indonesia, New Guinea, and the Philippines). There remains a huge area, the water boundaries of which form a parallelogram with a jagged western side (see map, page 29). The northern limit is 30 degrees North Latitude; the southern limit is 30 degrees South Latitude; the eastern limit is a line drawn between these parallels of latitude, from 140 to 100 degrees West longitude. The western limit begins in the East China Sea, at 126 degrees 30 minutes east longitude (30 degrees N. Lat.) and runs south-east to 160 degrees East Longitude (30 degrees S. Lat.) The straight line (as it would appear on Mercator's projection) is broken by a western salient to include Yap and the Palau Group, and by an easterly salient to exclude the capes of New Guinea.

Within the parallelogram lie the Ryukyu or Luchu Islands (except those nearest to Formosa), Japanese since 1879; the Bonins, Japanese since 1873; the Marianas, Carolines, and Marshalls, which have been under four sovereignties in little more than forty years, including