



Margaret Mackenzie-Hooson

GOLLIWOGS & Other Childhood Friends

We slept together every night, snuggling closely, and comforting one another warmly. I loved them with my whole being. We spent much of each day together playing, after I lined them up with their backs to the wall behind my bed. I did the talking and they listened. We embarked on marvelous explorations and imaginary expeditions. I told them long stories about what I had done after I left them behind and went on my wanderings. I also made up stories inspired by the characters in my favorite books: Christopher Robin, Winnie the Pooh, Peter Pan, Wendy, and Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*. I had no Māori story books about the indigenous people.

We lived on the south end of the South Island of New Zealand on a sheep farm. It was during the Second World War, and, because New Zealand was a Dominion of the British Empire, almost all the able-bodied men and many of the women were overseas serving in Europe, North Africa, and Burma. That included two of my half-brothers and two of my half-sisters. Two more half-sisters were working in New Zealand cities. My father was too old to serve and my parents had to run the 800-acre farm by themselves, a challenging task. I was my father's seventh and last child. He had been widowed and was in his second marriage.

The name of the farm was 'Pukepito Downs': 'Pukepito' in Māori means the peak of a hill. That 'Downs' is not an accurate translation epitomizes how absent was the memory of the earlier inhabitants of the land. We massacred the traditional musical pronunciation with our

settler vowels. Many of the place names were Māori, indicating that the people must have lived there before us, but I never heard them mentioned.

Beyond the realm of our farm there were no Māori farmers and no Māori families in the community made up of almost entirely of the descendants of Scottish immigrants. Also, there were no small children in the nearby neighborhood. Two older children lived about two hours walk from us; we would visit one another every so often. From their farm, I remember mostly the female possum who came indoors at night and ran freely around a railing high above the floor, never friendly and especially not when she had babies. A scar on one of my fingers, almost invisible today, reminds me of when it was caught in a possum trap.

A poultry-farming family—immigrants from the Orkney Islands north of Scotland—became firm friends and I was delighted to visit them and stay with them intermittently. Golly and the rest of my friends knew all about my visits.

I lived in a world not populated with many people and certainly not with people from varied backgrounds. All through my girlhood, I never saw a person with a black skin. I was utterly unaware of racial injustice.

Golly—with his black face, woolly hair, lively eyes, and brilliant smile—was the sprightliest of the group. He was dressed in a close fitting red jacket, and a stiff white collar with a black bow tie and black striped trousers. I had no idea how he came to me because it was before I had a concept of *before*. It was the same with Teddy Bear with his warm golden fur and with the black and white Panda.

Mother Koala Bear with her baby nestled on her back, presided over our play where she lived on a shelf above the bed. The bears were deemed precious by my mother, perhaps because they had come from far away. My oldest brother, a Battle of Britain pilot, had bought a mother and baby bear in Sydney as a gift for me on his way home and on leave from England, flying as a copilot on a Royal New Zealand Air Force flight.

The red doll was a gift from my father when I had inadvertently put my finger in the path of a saw as he was cutting wood for the household. Even though I could see it coming, I couldn't move my finger out of the way fast enough. I knew it was my mistake and it didn't hurt very much. I felt sorry for my father because he was overwhelmed with grief when he saw the tip of my finger floating in the bowl of water and Dettol disinfectant. Even then I felt a little guilty when he said I could choose whatever gift I wanted, and I boldly asked for a trip to the distant city of Christchurch because I was always left behind when my parents went there.

I remember going to the town of Balclutha with my mother to visit the stationmaster. That morning, she separated the cream from the milk that came from Daisy, the cow. Instead of putting it in the churn to make butter, we took the cream with us. In wartime, fuel and food were scarce and expensive; it was difficult for civilians to buy seats on trains, and food was rationed because it was sent overseas for the troops. My mother gave the precious cream, along with

money, to the stationmaster, and in return we received tickets. It was in Christchurch that I chose the red doll. She had a white face and was dressed in scarlet with a bonnet and a muff. The hem of her frock was lined with lambswool.

My bedroom was at the end of the house. It was presumably meant to lodge a visiting shepherd. I had persuaded my parents to let me occupy it; that bedroom kept me from the noise and the revelry, and gave me wonderful freedom. Our farm was in a “dry” area where alcohol was illegal. Obtained from a distance, wine, beer and spirits were safe to consume during boisterous parties far from town. In wartime, all sorts of taboos were broken by urban and rural people. Looking back now, I see that the farm was beyond the boundaries of customary conventions.

Just outside the door to my room was the next realm in my world. Mrs. Cat was the mother of many offspring, eventually numbering twenty-five, until my father culled nineteen of them. The job of the cats was to keep the property free of mice and rats. They were also my friends. The culling made me inconsolable. Golly and the others comforted me in my despair.

My six bedroom companions could witness life in the immediate yard, but I had to tell them about the distant creatures. The sheepdogs had individual kennels nearby, but out of sight from my bedroom, each with an opening just large enough for them to enter and exit. The border collies were highly skilled at mustering sheep. The head dog, Joe, was the one I loved more than the others. He tolerated my cuddling. Ever since I learned to walk, Joe let me join him for the hour that he and the other dogs enjoyed after lunch. I was the only person on the farm small enough to fit into the tiny entrance Joe’s kennel.

Beyond the boundaries of the homestead were the farm animals. Daisy, the black and white cow, had a paddock near the cowshed where she was milked at night and in the morning. I was respectful; she was liable to kick me if she were irritated. She didn’t appreciate the way *I* tried to milk her. The henhouse with its railings for roosting shared Daisy’s paddock. In the mornings, the fussy rooster imperiously led the hens outdoors, officiously organizing the procession. At night he shooed them in again. The hens and their eggs might have made a banquet for visiting stoats and weasels. Before nightfall we collected the eggs. My six bedroom companions knew all about this.

Across the yard, was the stable with the six immense, magnificent draught horses. The stallion, Prince; was the leader; the others, all mares, were named after female members of the family. They towered above me. Arrayed in their bridles and collars, with my father holding the reins, they pulled the dray and the implements necessary for ploughing the soil and for sowing and cutting the crops on the farm.

Sometimes my father would take me with him while he worked. We would ride together on one horse, bareback, I in front, on the way to and from the fields. The horses were too majestic for intimacy. But they were gentle and endlessly engrossing. At night they would go

into their individual stalls to sleep. They would have noose bags suspended from their heads, or loose boxes, to eat their oats.

My favorite sanctuary beyond my bedroom was the warm loft which I reached by a ladder and where I listened to the soothing rhythmic sounds of the horses eating in the dark. Of course, all of this provided infinite material for stories to regale my six companions. Sometimes I would load Golly, Teddy, Panda, and the red doll in a pram. and take them to visit the farm animals.

Beyond the yard, and on the paddocks of the farm itself there were hundreds of sheep. I was not particularly intimate with them except when there was an orphaned baby lamb. If a ewe died, my father would try to persuade another ewe who had lost her newborn to adopt the orphan—often by wrapping it in the fleece of the lamb who had died. If the potential mother refused, my father would bring the orphan home; it would be placed, very very gently, in the warm oven to help it survive. Then it would be fed with milk from a bottle until it was able to eat on its own. Pet lambs became deeply loved; their departure in a few months to be killed for export as frozen meat to Britain was unbearable. The six companions in the bedroom knew about this only too well.

Sometimes, my father would bring home baby rabbits for me to put in a cage as pets. That never succeeded. In those days, rabbits became a plague. There were also small freshwater crayfish and eels in the stream where we had a pump that supplied water to the house when the rainwater tanks ran low. I was a merciless predator: I caught eels with a safety pin and the crayfish with my hands. I cooked some of them when my parents permitted, and supervised when I had a campfire and slept in a tent under the large nearby trees..

When I was five I was sent to a boarding school in a cloistered Catholic convent, also with its own farm.. If I had gone to the local school I would have had to ride a horse for five miles to and from home.

Leaving home was thrilling and terrifying. I had to leave my six companions behind. That was the end of my childhood innocence.

The convent was austere. Soon after I arrived I opened a book one night and saw a picture of a cat I remember the flood of tears that poured down my cheeks. None of my beloved companions were anywhere near to provide comfort.

Worse was to come. I was now an adult. I do not remember the exact day or the place or time. Only the searing shock.

Golly was revealed to me as an embodiment of racism and an expression of prejudice. His very existence was now forbidden. Golly, I learned was a savage satire on Black minstrel singers, jeered at as lazy, vacuous, and indelibly inferior.

Golly was indeed a “golliwog.” I learned that golliwogs had been invented by an illustrator named Florence Kate Upton, a white woman born in the United States to British parents. She had

returned to England where her mother wrote the verses for the book they published in 1895, *The Adventures of two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwog*. At first, the golliwog was a reasonably jolly character, but in later stories he became sinister and menacing. In 1908 Debussy was inspired by the golliwog, and, influenced by African American music, composed the “Golliwog’s Cakewalk” for his daughter Emma. In the twentieth century, Golliwogs became popular dolls.

They were and still are more well-known in Britain than in the United States. In Northern California, many of my friends, including African-Americans, have never heard of them.

I had long heard the British saying: “The Wogs begin at Calais,”; Calais being the French port closest to England. “Wog” was a racial slur for anyone with a dark skin. As a colonial girl and woman, I was familiar with the condescending attitude toward us New Zealanders. Should we open our mouths and give voice to our accents, we were placed at the bottom of the status ladder. But there was a lower rung reserved for the colonials with a black skin.

The word “wog” has been linked to its use in India during imperial times as a way of saying “worthy oriental gentleman,” and also as slang used by the British Armed Forces to designate an Indian servant or laborer. “Wog” was also apparently used in Egypt when it was still a British colony to describe a government employee who was Egyptian and not English. Defenders still claim that wog is not demeaning, but an abbreviation for “working on Government Service,” including a reference to Egyptian laborers building the Suez canal.

Golliwogs were, and to some extent, are still popular in New Zealand. In 2019 there was a national uproar when women tourists from Britain and the United States landed in Picton on the South Island and discovered a stall on the wharf that was selling golliwog dolls. They protested vigorously. The dolls were banned from sale at the wharf, although some were still sold on the Internet as late as 2020.

The New Zealand women who had handmade the golliwogs ardently proclaimed their innocence. They insisted they were not racist. There was plenty of support for the ban. The Commissioner of Race Relations concurred.

At the same time, an uproar in defense of the golliwogs erupted on the New Zealand Internet: apparently 3000 postings insisted on the innocence of the beloved dolls. Many invoked the Egyptian use of wogs as harmless.

Icons of racism were instilled in the infancy and in the ignorance of many children. It was an ignorance anchored in white privilege. I had been oblivious. I had loved Golly with the simple love of early childhood. As soon as I learned the origins of the story I could no longer countenance loving a doll who originated as a racist symbol. I could not permit myself—I felt no longer entitled—to love a childhood companion who had been created as an object of derision for Black people, and for the purpose of insulting, offending, hurting and subduing them.

Golly became the specter of my forbidden love.

Margaret Mackenzie-Hooson is a New Zealander who came to the US as a graduate student in 1969. A medical anthropologist, she has done research in islands in the Pacific as well as in California. After teaching at UC Berkeley and retiring from California College of the Arts, she has turned to exploring the foundations of racism and prejudice among people of privilege.