

# A doll that can't escape its past

Wed, Jan 23, 2008

Golliwogs were condemned as embarrassing relics of a racist past - so why are they back on the shelves, asks Finola Meredith

Taken at face value, it could be seen as the picture of lovable innocence, with its soft brown mop-top, wide-eyed stare and friendly smile. Look again, and you may see a crude and offensive racist caricature staring back at you. The "golly" doll - that latter-day pariah of the toybox - is back, and its re-emergence in shops across the North has sparked a fresh row over the role and meaning of the old-fashioned toy. The golliwog - now almost universally known by the sanitised abbreviation "golly" - first appeared in the pages of a children's story book by American writer Florence Kate Upton in 1895, where it was described as "a horrid sight, the blackest gnome". Golliwogs later featured as rude and mischievous villains in the writing of Enid Blyton, who, in the 1940s, styled her trio of characters "Golly, Woggie and Nigger". A popular soft toy throughout most of the 20th century, the golliwog gradually fell from favour as public awareness grew of its distasteful origins.

The latest controversy began in December, when Mr Christmas, a temporary store in a Belfast shopping centre, started selling the black-faced dolls. Condemnation from the Equality Commissioner, Bob Collins - who described them as an inappropriate "throwback to the 50s" - resulted in a swift apology from the shop owner, who agreed to return the rest of his stock to the manufacturer, despite the apparent popularity of the dolls with the shopping public.

Earlier this month, gollies - in the form of keyrings and money boxes - were spotted again in a department store, Wyse Byse in east Belfast, and anti-racism campaigners urged the shop to get rid of them. Patrick Yu, director of the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) said, "Something which was acceptable 20 to 30 years ago does not mean it is okay now. I don't want a witch-hunt here, I think education is a better approach. These store owners just need to know that these dolls can be offensive to some ethnic minorities." It's a view echoed by Anna Lo, Alliance party MLA for South Belfast, the first politician from an ethnic minority background to take a seat at the Northern Ireland Assembly. "You can't ban these things, but I appeal to the good sense of shopkeepers.

"If they were not aware they may be offensive to people, I would hope that they are now. I would also urge people to challenge shopkeepers or assistants, much in the same way the disability sector did with people parking in disabled spaces, by making them aware these dolls could be offensive to ethnic minorities."

As in the Mr Christmas case, humble contrition was the department store's response. The well-known shop - something of a Belfast institution, where customers can buy everything from cheap tights to gilt-framed mirrors - quickly moved to assure customers that no offence was meant, and that all outstanding orders for the items in question would be cancelled.

Wyse Byse manager Gordon Smith admits that the store has stocked them for the last seven years without complaint, but insists that gollies won't be returning to the shelves. "The last thing we want to do is offend any of our customers," he says. But he adds ruefully, "Now it seems that something is deemed offensive where previously it wasn't. I can't help thinking - where does it all end?"

But there was no such capitulation when an anti-racism official from Dungannon Council and police officers came calling at the Linen Mill Centre in Moygashel, Co Tyrone, after a customer complained about golly keyrings on sale there. Owner Dave Russell - who claims that sales of the items have surged dramatically since the complaint became public - insists that he is not breaking the law, and that he will continue to stock them. Invoking the familiar rallying cry of "political correctness gone mad", he asks, "what on earth are the council doing pursuing this? It's a vast waste of our money as taxpayers. I'm accused of being racist, but there is no racist element whatsoever here. They are just cute, cuddly little things. They're innocent. When people see them as racist, I think that's because they've got racism in them themselves."

Local opinion is split over the issue in the Co Tyrone town. Some residents support the actions of the council - citing its statutory duty to tackle racism and promote inclusion - while others are impatient and contemptuous of the fuss over the gollies.

One letter-writer to a Belfast newspaper expostulated, "You can buy dolls of several different skin colours, so was it the title of the said doll that caused these do-gooders to go out of their way to be offended? If so, change the title of the damn doll and get on with selling it."

Tim Brannigan, a black writer and cultural commentator who grew up in republican west Belfast, has seen it all before. Recalling the famous golly motif on Robertson's jam jars (which the British company finally ditched in 2001), he says, "I've been the only black in the village for most of my life, and when I was at school, I was always on the receiving end of jokes about Robertson's jam. So for me, golliwogs are forever associated with the slugging I got at school."

Brannigan says there are no two ways about it - gollies are offensive, whether people acknowledge that or not. "That's the bottom line, no matter how people defend them. I'm constantly surprised how people do. With their cartoon-like exaggerated features, gollies are grotesque characters, a throwback to a time of gross stereotypes."

However, Brannigan seems to suggest that it's often ignorance rather than overt racism that leads to customers buying - and defending buying - gollies.

"People don't look at a golly in a shop window and instantly think of 500 years of slavery. They are more likely to take a nostalgic approach, remembering dolls they might have had as children. Most people don't go in for sophisticated cultural analysis when they're buying toys. They don't see deeply enough, or else they just don't care. You know, in Ireland, North and South, we like to think of ourselves as much-loved people who get on well with everyone, but Ireland is full of prejudice, and this is just one example of that."

Like Anna Lo and Patrick Yu, Brannigan believes that educating people about the unattractive history of the doll is the only way to bring about a change of opinion in society. And he insists that castigating small rural shops that stock gollies, such as the Linen Mill, isn't likely to help; rather, he says, it's vital that politicians and the local media give people a strong lead on this and other race issues.

So while the cute dolls perched on gift-shop shelves may look as sweet as pie, it seems that there's no getting away from the facts. Alongside its varied status as a collector's item, a piece of kitsch memorabilia and a nostalgia-laden childhood plaything, the golliwog is indubitably the product of a racist era, and as such, it excites fascination and revulsion in equal measure.

David Pilgrim, an American sociology professor who curates the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University, calls golliwogs and other racially objectionable items "contemptible collectables". "To me," he says, "this stuff is garbage. It belongs either in a museum or a garbage can."

Contemptible collectables

Saddam Hussein memorabilia: souvenirs connected to the former Iraqi leader include banknotes and coins, and even cutlery from one of his presidential palaces

Black and White Minstrels albums: "singalong favourites" CDs are a common sight on internet auction sites

9/11 souvenirs: collectables related to the terrorist attacks include flags, baseball caps and coffee mugs, and even subway signs for the World Trade Center station.

Nazi memorabilia: they are banned for sale on eBay, with examples including swastika flags, SS daggers and Nazi-era Iron Crosses

Ku Klux Klan items: Klansman salute statues, swords and ceremonial uniforms (with hoods) change hands online for hundreds of dollars.

2008 The Irish Times