

## Finding Dorothy : Reviewed

by Monica Hall

### *Titanic Review*

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Randy Bryan Bigham's book, *Finding Dorothy* is interesting. Less so, perhaps, for the 'techies' amongst us, but certainly for the legion of humanities researchers who are primarily interested in the people aboard the *Titanic*. And what an interesting lot those people have proved to be over the years, and one does wonder if a modern ship would provide so much humanitarian interest.

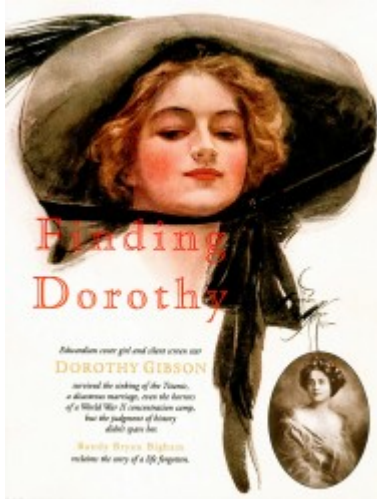
So often we believe that the people who lived before us were fundamentally different, much less sophisticated, and probably without the sort of sense of humour which we would recognise or appreciate. Or, instead, that they were poverty-stricken, socially-constrained, work-burdened, and consequently far less energised.

There are many books which give the lie to this generalised impression. *The Diary of a Nobody* (the Grossmith brothers) proves that 19-year olds in the late 19th Century were very much like our own 19-year olds today (equally idiotic and, nonetheless, generally lovable, albeit with a bit of effort involved). And *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Anita Loos), set in the 1920s, reinforces the idea that being economically secure and upwardly mobile via an alpha male's maña was the main preoccupation of women until 40 odd years ago. However, anyone wanting to see how very similar we are to our forebears in terms of vitality and fortitude need go no further than the wonderful recently-restored films of [Mitchell & Kenyon](#), pioneers in "going live" documentaries, way back at the turn of the 20th Century.



## Which brings us back to Dorothy.

Dorothy Gibson was intriguingly contemporary in her outlook and career, and it is this which lends us her greatest interest. It might not be so intriguing if we knew our social history better, but since we mostly don't, it inevitably is. As in the case of several contemporary female notables - Britney Spears, Charlotte Church etc. - her mother was a considerable influence, although it has to be said that Dorothy's mother lasted longer as a mentor than most modern mothers seem to, despite having some rather troublesome personal attributes, such as predilection for fascism. Although, to be fair, one must remember that this was an era in which many people perceived that the only political choice was between fascism and communism.



The opening scene for the book is Dorothy and her mother on the *Titanic* returning from a trip to Europe. Their escape from the sinking ship is not especially riveting, although Dorothy's apparent appreciation of the dire situation led to some men being saved as a result of her insistence on early evacuation, which must have been a cause of devout and continued thanksgiving for those concerned. Much more interesting is her life before and, even more so, after the *Titanic* disaster. It came to involve spying. One is reminded of Mata Hari, reputedly quite a good dancer, but apparently a very poor spy. She paid with her life in WW1, but Dorothy was luckier.

*Finding Dorothy* is a good account of a pretty woman's career in the early movies, and the sad reasons for her subsequent demise of fame. But more than this, it is an evocative account of an era which we can only slightly grasp. There was, paradoxically, such freedom, so much enterprise, and such fun, and it was all over-shadowed by the two World Wars. Those of us constrained by the modern audit culture and globalisation can only wonder at such cultural quandaries.

For anyone interested in the Gilded Age, I would certainly recommend *Finding Dorothy*. If for no other reason than it describes an era constrained by social mores, which seem far less consequential than the constraints of rules and accountability that we live under now. It is also a very good tale, of and obvious interest to Edwardian researchers, and to those who are fascinated by the differences and similarities between that era and our own .

Randy Bryan Bigham has researched Dorothy Gibson assiduously, and so far as is possible at such a remove, successfully evoked her character and career. The only criticism I would have of this book is that it is quite rich in adjectives and adverbs. But that doesn't really matter for students of the Gilded Age. They are used to it and, possibly, even regret its passing in more stark modern literature.

And the style is suitably evocative of the contradictions in the personality of the subject - a rather modern girl causing some much-needed mayhem in an un-emancipated age, and the rather sad demise of her career.

And the many lovely illustrations are to die for.

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Courtesy of [Monica Hall](#)

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