

photo: Courtesy Alan Hiley Jr.

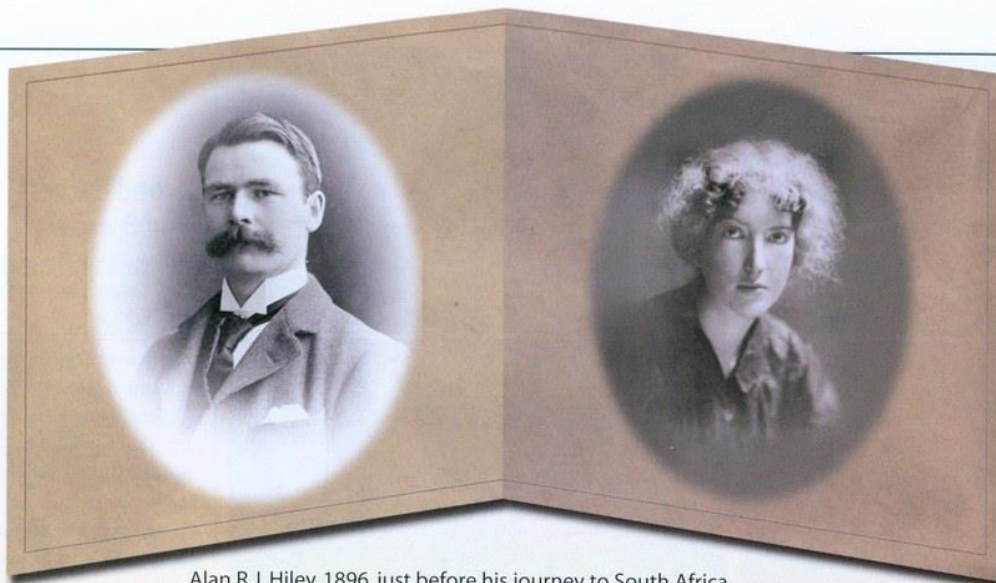


photo: Geoffrey Dunn Collection

Alan R.I. Hiley, 1896, just before his journey to South Africa.
Nora May French, circa 1906, by photographer Arnold Genthe, with whom she also may have had an affair.

A 'Misfit' in the Mountains

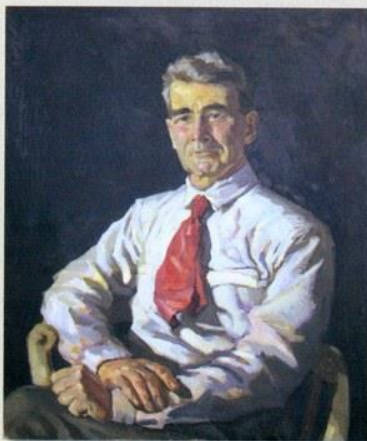
The historical mystery of Felton recluse Captain Alan Hiley is solved

By Geoffrey Dunn

On the night of Nov. 14, 1907, in a small Carmel guest cottage belonging to the famed California poet George Sterling, the 26-year-old poetess Nora May French, already a well-known literary figure throughout the state, swallowed a dose of potassium cyanide and took her life.

Sterling described French as "an inscrutable creature, with hair of the brightest gold and a deadly smile," and with lips like a "scarlet thread." He was an admirer of her work, calling her poetry "crystalline," but he also viewed her as a "stormy petrel" and noted rather ruefully that "she played with men as with pebbles." She was a literary femme fatale.

At the time of her suicide, French was still linked to a mysterious figure she had first met in Los Angeles, Alan Hiley, who was then living in a remote, hilltop cabin in Santa Cruz County, just south of Felton. She apparently had other lovers as well.



Captain Alan R.I. Hiley. "The man in the red tie," oil on canvas, by well-known California painter, E. Spencer Macky, circa 1918.

In various accounts, Hiley was described as "a wood rancher" and a "soldier of fortune." *The Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel* declared that "very little is known about Hiley, only that he has virtually lived the life of a recluse since he took up his abode in the picturesque woods."

The San Francisco Call, however, did a little more digging. It described Hiley in front-page headlines as a "War Hero" and pointed out that he had been a captain in the Boer Wars, fighting against his native England. It also noted that Hiley was "something of an author himself, having written *The Mobile Boer*," a detailed account of the brutal military struggle in South Africa.

Later-day historians did not follow *The Call's* lead. In all the various accounts of French's death, Hiley is universally described as a "prosperous timber farmer," and his story is left at that—a one-dimensional bit player in a tragic literary suicide.

Digitally photographed by Ed Penniman

The secrets to Hiley's life still reside on that glorious mountaintop near Felton and, as it turns out, they have been there waiting for historians all along. Hiley's son, Alan Jr., retired now after operating a well-known tree service in Santa Cruz County, and his wife, Betty, are the keepers of Hiley's personal archive.

His writings, photographs, newspaper clippings and documents reveal a fascinating, complex life full of global adventure, drama and notoriety.

Alan Richard Hiley was born on May 28, 1868, in Richfield, England, to a prominent British family. His father was a widely respected minister, and on his mother's side, he was a direct descendant of the legendary Scottish clan MacDonnell of Glengarry. In his early teens he trained to be an officer in the British Navy, only to run afoul of the Lords of the Admiralty, and he jumped aboard a German ship en route to South America. Thus began a 20-year period of adventure and, as he called it, "wanderlust."

In 1895 he was working as a cowboy in Wyoming. A short time later he operated diamond mines in South Africa, and when the Second Boer War broke out, he was named captain of an international company of soldiers, predominantly Americans, and reported directly to the legendary Boer general, Louis Botha.

Hiley's account of the war, *The Mobile Boer*, written with John A. Hassell, was extremely well-received by critics and brought Hiley national and international acclaim, though only modest royalties. Hiley returned to the United States in 1902, then worked his way west across the continent, as a cowboy and silver miner, in Arizona and northern Mexico.

Hiley was in his mid-30s when he met the alluring Nora May French in Los Angeles. Handsome, charming and confident, Hiley was never wanting for female companionship. He was married when he became engaged to French and promised to get a divorce.

French, however, was impatient. She had fallen in love with another married man, Henry Anderson Lafler, editor of *The Argonaut*, a literary magazine based in San Francisco, and broke off her engagement to Hiley and moved

In the aftermath of French's suicide, Hiley retreated to his hillside haven, clearing brush, cutting firewood and planting fruit trees. He called his home "Sholem," from the Hebrew shalom, which he translated as "the peace that passeth all understanding."

Hiley also returned to a life of the mind. A voracious reader, he wrote several short stories—one of which was published in Australia—and several philosophical essays. He

also wrote an memoir entitled "The Autobiography of a Misfit."

When he was well past 50, he met a lovely young visitor from San Jose by the name of Alma Graun. By all accounts, Hiley found the love of his life in Alma, who shared his love of isolation and literature. They married soon thereafter and, two years later, had a son, Alan Jr., whom they raised together in their redwood paradise.

Hiley never had any further encounters with the literati who surrounded Nora May French at the time of her suicide. In his papers is a single photo denoting the spot in Point Lobos where her ashes were scattered and a newspaper account about George Sterling, which included a brief reference to French's suicide. That particular

page had been turned long ago.

In January of 1930, while carrying groceries and kerosene back to his home, Hiley died of a massive heart attack alongside the road he had named Glengarry a quarter century before, in honor his family's heritage in the Scottish Highlands. ■

Santa Cruz writer and filmmaker Geoffrey Dunn is currently at work on a biography of George Sterling and a history of bohemian literary traditions along the Central California Coast. He would like to thank Stan Stevens and Jennifer Fosgate for research assistance in the Hihn-Younger Archive at UCSC.



photo: Courtesy Alan Hiley Jr.

Alan Hiley, his son Alan Jr. and his wife Alma, at his hilltop vista, just south of Felton in July 1925.

French was described as "an inscrutable creature, with hair of the brightest gold and a deadly smile," and with lips like a "scarlet thread."

north to San Francisco.

In the aftermath of the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire, in April of 1906, Hiley grew concerned for French's safety and journeyed north to find her—which he did, but not before encountering a friend along the way, Nathan Griest, a bookseller, who introduced him to the natural beauties of Santa Cruz County.

Less than four months later, on August 3, 1906, Hiley purchased 32 acres of land from the F.A. Hihn Company just south of Felton. He bought 47 more acres the following year, hoping that French would join him there. Instead, she ran off to Carmel-by-the-Sea.