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# Gray Barker: My Friend, the Myth-Maker

*Gray Barker, who raised the "Men in Black" concept to prominence in UFO lore, didn't mind if the sensational flying-saucer stories he published were made up—as long as they were presented as fact. To him it was all a joke. Here John Sherwood ("Dr. Richard H. Pratt") for the first time confesses his role in Barker's flying-saucer, "Men in Black" myth-making.*

JOHN C. SHERWOOD

If Gray Barker were alive today, he'd think he'd died and gone to heaven. Seems that now everyone has heard of the "Men in Black," a concept he first raised to prominence in UFO lore.

And, of course, he'd try to make a fast buck off of them.

The late Gray Barker, head of Saucerian Publications and author of numerous books about flying saucers, was one of the most prolific writers and publishers in the "fringe" area of UFO fanaticism.

Some amusing yet disturbing details about Barker's constructive (and certainly destructive) contributions to the fantasy world of UFOs have lurked in my files for decades. Despite the personal shame I attach to them, their general release is long overdue.

Gray and I never met face to face, but I owe to him the

beginning of my journalistic career, and my only corrupt journalistic experience. In 1967, he published my somewhat juvenile "history" of the 1966 Michigan UFO "scare," a book Gray titled *Flying Saucers Are Watching You*. Its publication gained me my first newspaper job. After that, Gray and I shared a lengthy correspondence, and he may even have considered me one of his protégés. Gray also put me in touch with some of the more extravagant figures in the UFO field, including the notorious Richard Shaver of "Shaver mystery" fame, and enjoyed my reciprocal sense of humor.

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I pulled Gray's letters out of my files after my wife and I saw the trailer for the 1997 summer movie hit *Men in Black*, the Tommy Lee Jones/Will Smith megamillion-dollar movie spectacle that owes a fair share of its style to Gray's 1956 book *They Knew Too Much about Flying Saucers*. The fact that I had kept the letters might bother Gray now, considering what I'm about to confess. In fact, Gray (and some others deceived by what he and I concocted) may meet me in hell with fangs at the ready. To those who were fooled, I certainly owe an apology for the role I played. But it's time that this material was made public.

Barker's day job was as a theatrical film booker in Clarksburg, West Virginia. He also was a talented writer, an early lover of flying-saucer lore, and a man who could make a good story better. He was hyperimaginative and could have written science fiction.

A lot of what he wrote probably was just that. But he always offered his accounts as fact.

*They Knew Too Much about Flying Saucers* made the *Men in Black* (M.I.B.) feared within UFO circles during the late 1950s and 1960s. The book now is hard to find, and my hardcover copy—the third printing—has crispy pages. In it, Gray told about alleged brushes between the sinister M.I.B. and a Connecticut man, Al K. Bender, who set the pace for what is now the stereotypical M.I.B. story: Someone sees a UFO and tries to tell the world about it. Without warning, three men in black suits and driving a big black car confront the witness. Afterwards, the witness appears too frightened to talk further about the UFO—or anything else. *Woo-WOOO-oo!*

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*John C. Sherwood is opinion-page editor for the Battle Creek Enquirer in Battle Creek, Michigan. He can be reached at 120 W. Hanover St., Marshall, MI 49068. E-mail: jcs@glfn.org or sherwood@internet1.net.*

In account after account within the pages of *They Knew Too Much* and subsequent writings by others (including John Keel, who began using the shorthand "M.I.B." in his writings), the mysterious trio—who at times seem to have uncanny mental powers and weird, otherworldly faces—squench all discussion about supposedly true UFO encounters. The whole notion smacked of a huge, pre-Watergate conspiracy.

As I began to write this apologetic revelation in July 1997, the news came that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency indeed may have participated in a coverup not unlike that supposedly initiated by the fabled M.I.B. U.S. intelligence historian Gerald K. Haines wrote an unclassified article for *Studies of Intelligence*, a CIA journal, revealing that during the 1950s the U.S. Air Force and other agencies actually did conspire to suppress the UFO issue and to concoct false cover stories to explain sightings of such super-secret U.S. spy planes as the U-2 and later the SR-71

Blackbird (the Internet address for Haines's study is <http://www.odci.gov/csi/studies/97unclas/ufo.html>).

So, Bender, Barker, and the rest indeed may have been inspired by a grain (or several grains) of truth. But that doesn't contradict what I am about to disclose about Barker's participation in—and encouragement of—actual fraud to perpetuate sales of his UFO books and magazines.

I knew little about the bizarre world of "ufology" when I typed up a detailed account about the 1966 Michigan UFO sightings and sent the manuscript to Saucerian Publications, the book company Gray had set up with the profits from *They Knew Too Much*. Gray published my book in 1967, paid me a satisfying sum, and made me a published writer at age seventeen. With that on my resume, I got my first newspaper job, in my hometown of Marshall, Michigan. Two years later, I was working in the *Battle Creek Enquirer* newsroom in Battle Creek, Michigan, where I work as opinion-page editor today.

Meanwhile, Gray and I continued to correspond. Here's one telling excerpt from a letter of his dated June 27, 1968: "Strictly off the record, unusual interest and fixation upon UFOs represents, in my opinion, a definite symptom of neurosis. . . . I cannot (again off the record) bear for very long most of the people and the fans of saucerdom, mainly because most of them are oral aggressors (i.e., they talk all the time about saucers and make you listen). I do genuinely like a few saucerers (and former saucerers) like yourself, who, along with their interest in saucers, seem to be pretty sane and can have a sense of humor about it."

That same year, in creative zeal, I had sent to him a sci-fi piece I wrote about a scientific organization that discovers that UFOs are actually time machines, then encounters a more sinister enemy group of time-travelers who try to destroy them. The story began with a pseudoscholarly discussion by a ficti-



Gray Barker

tious scientist, Dr. Richard H. Pratt, about time travel and UFOs. The rest of it was about Pratt's mysterious encounter with three strange individuals "trapped" in our own time.

Gray urged me to try to make the incident seem real by creating a fictitious organization out of whole cloth. In youthful amorality, I picked up Gray's ball and sent a letter to Ray Palmer's *Flying Saucer* magazine, which, in early 1969, published verbatim my anonymous announcement of the formation of an organization that identified itself only as the B.I.C.R., supposedly formed by three men whose names were given as William A. Gautier, Thomas Harper, and R. James Kipling (names I concocted using my shelf of books by great fiction writers). Meanwhile, as I prepared for my busy college years, I had disbanded a small but legitimate UFO-investigation group I had led since 1965 and ceased publishing a small "saucer 'zine" I had been sending to associates in thirteen states.

Gray's letter quoted above went on about the reaction to the news in the UFO world about my UFO group's disbandment: "Did you see *Saucer Scoop*?" he wrote. "They're doing a big deal on you, suggesting you really were hushed by the blackmen. I'll always be glad to print an article by you if you'll tell the *real* (or made up) story of how these strange forces made you quit. You might as well go out of saucers in the usual syndrome."

I wrote to Gray saying that I would follow up in the form of a rewritten version of the Dr. Pratt/time-travel sci-fi piece I'd already sent him. I said I would make it clear that it was just a story. Here was his response on July 12, 1968: "I think that the sci-fi story you are thinking of, revealing at the end that it's made up, would be a little too negative. Already some readers are accusing us of making up things (which we *do* occasionally of course). How about an article just making your exiting from research even *more* mysterious than ever!"

In my youthful naiveté and desire to be published, I didn't challenge the wrongness of this. It took me a few months to put together the revised story, now ready to be published as true. In a letter dated December 7, 1968, Gray coached me: "Try to make it as technical as possible to make it look like a real scientific report. The real scientists who read our 'zine will see the hoax and I hope take it as a joke." My article "Flying Saucers: Time Machines," by "Dr. Richard H. Pratt," was published in the Spring/Summer 1969 issue of Barker's magazine *Saucer News*, followed by "The Strange B.I.C.R. Affair" in the Summer 1970 issue.

An interim letter, recounting his work on a book about the West Virginia "Mothman" sightings, reflects Gray's attitude

about publishing fiction as nonfiction: "About half of it is a recounting of actual sightings and events in the Ohio Valley circa 1966. . . . I think that the 'true accounts' are told in an exciting way, but I have deliberately stuck in fictional chapters based roughly on cases I had heard about." Evidently, Gray had few qualms about publishing as fact fictional material deliberately contrived for release under the Saucerian Press label and for *Saucer News*.

Gray wrote to me about the reaction to "Flying Saucers: Time Machines": "Evidently the fans swallowed this one with a gulp." Subsequent notes in my files include copies of letters Gray sent to other UFO researchers, including Ray Palmer, disingenuously requesting follow-up data on the supposedly true identity of "Richard H. Pratt," who now supposedly had dropped mysteriously from sight. These notes thankfully drew suspicion away from myself.

In early 1983, shortly before he died of a heart attack, Gray published another book, *M.I.B.: The Secret Terror Among Us*, which he dedicated to Al K. Bender, the Connecticut man who had inspired *They Knew Too Much*. Gray devoted an entire chapter to "Dr. Pratt" and presented the story as if it really might be true. To my perpetual shame, I shut up again. After all, I told myself, Gray had given me my career break—and he was publishing my stuff. I tried to ignore that he was playing fast and loose with the truth. And I had realized that a lot of what he had written before probably was just as loose.

Over the years, I have received mail from various people who have wondered whether I might know something about the background of the strange "B.I.C.R. affair." I always claimed that I knew nothing or that I didn't want to talk more about it. Even after Gray died, I kept quiet.

But the myth has moved to a new stage in its evolution, and it is only right that some background be provided about the

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man who helped to launch it. I have tuned in the TV series *Night Skies* and seen the Men in Black portrayed as government agents flying scary black helicopters. And, of course, it wouldn't surprise me to see Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith return in a sequel to last summer's big movie hit. It's only a matter of time before someone puts together a supposed "true history" of the M.I.B.; and because of Gray, it will be very difficult to separate the wheat (if there is any) from the chaff.

The saving grace is that the movie was presented as a comedy. That's appropriate, because so much of it really is a huge joke. And that weird laughter you hear is coming from Gray Barker's grave. □