The Enemy Within
Hucksters, Racketeers, Deserters, and Civilians During the Second World War
DONALD THOMAS
New York University, $29.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8147-8286-8

The subtitle of this engaging work defines precisely what is delivered. Here are the details of a World War II era that has been gloriously romanticized in fiction, on stage, and in movies, warmly fixated in the public imagination as a nostalgic chapter in history when entire populations worked and thought as one, united in their opposition to a common enemy. The author, a British historian who has written about the underworld in the Victorian era, tackles an overlooked side story of this era: the thorny problem of human frailty during such uniquely defined times. Careful to point out that both memory and history are correct about the sacrifices entailed in that conflict, he then takes readers on an unsettling journey through other truths, including a long list of ill-mannered, illegal, and downright unsocial activities. While thousands of firefighters risked their lives dealing with the destruction caused by German bombs, for example, there were also large numbers of civilians (and in some cases, moonlighting soldiers) taking advantage of the mayhem to loot deserted structures, houses abandoned after being struck by bombs as well as those merely unattended during air raids.

The size, scope, and brazenness of criminal activity during the war are astonishing enough; they are made more telling by the ingenuity and perseverance of the criminals involved. Although the book is largely focused on British society, Yanks quickly became part of the perfidy once U.S. forces began arriving in England. Soldiers and citizens receive equal treatment here in the big picture as well as amazing trivia: Tens of thousands of U.S. and British soldiers deserted after D-day; a London resident was imprisoned for snoring ("he did wilfully disturb other persons in the proper use of an air raid shelter"); 600 British citizens a month were killed in nighttime accidents directly related to the blackout; the British army resorted to shipping supplies of army boots in separate lots—left and right boots in different shipments—to thwart thefts of entire cargoes. In the end, the author reasons that wartime conditions have more to do with this kind of immoral activity than with a collapse of morality itself.

Mean-minded crimes had always existed. So had crimes that were seen as necessary by their perpetrators. Yet perhaps there had never been such a time when it was possible to rob, cheat and racketeer in the most important areas of life with a sense that there was no victim, given that government and authority were insensitive to pain.

Inside the Victorian Home
A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England
JUDITH FLANDERS

With a wealth of details, this knowledgeable and intriguing book revisits an often overfantasized aspect of British history: the Victorian household. From modern TV programs to recent Hollywood movie extravaganzas, this imagined iconic environment is a Garden of Eden compared with the daily realities that people actually faced. Not only was this an era fueled by a heavy, dirty commodity—coal—it lacked most of the conveniences we take for granted today.

Flanders relies on period diaries, letters, and other sources to present a new and gritty reality. Teething at that time, for example, was thought to cause nearly 16 percent of all child deaths, not because it was fatal physiologically, but because of the deadly consequences of how it was treated. Another detail:

Kitchen ranges and fires for heating throughout the house, together with London’s foggy climate, ensured that the city was filthy, inside and out.

Primarily focusing on the middle class, the book also includes a pertinent perspective on the servants who often toiled in Victorian homes and the unwelcome consequences when a woman lost a husband. Themes are roughly organized around profiles of various rooms—the kitchen, the parlor, etc.—and provide a starting point for wider exploration of activities and issues, including entertaining, cooking, and bathing. The outside world is also included, especially the culture and street life encountered while traveling within a major city at the time. Although many, if not most, of the details of daily life in this era will appear grim to us, the author presents an objective view, including other, more uplifting aspects as well. She states:

It is too easy for us to think of the Victorian era—or any part of the past—as “romantic.” For some it was an endless succession of cold, dirt, and dark, of black bombazine and narrow stairs. For others, though, it was fuchsine and peacock blue, as well as celadon skies.

Locust
The Devastating Rise and Mysterious Disappearance of the Insect That Shaped the American Frontier
JEFFREY A. LOCKWOOD

If you have never encountered a swarm of locusts, envision millions of grasshoppers on steroids traveling in dense clouds as ominous as a thunderstorm. Long associated with the American West, locusts are, in fact, a legendary pest that has inflicted civilizations across thousands of years and on every major continent. The author informs us that the word itself comes from a Latin term meaning “burnt place,” an apt label throughout their interaction with humans because of the devastation locusts leave behind. Although the biology of this insect and its impact in other cultures are included here, the primary focus is the western part of North America, where periodic outbreaks have altered the landscape and to some degree, modern history. Lockwood, a natural scientist, explores the subject with passion, explaining complex interactions in the same engaging style as the important historical lessons this pesky insect beast has to offer.

REVIEWER: Kim Long is a contributing editor to TBR.