THE VICTORIAN ARTS CENTRE is not the Sydney Opera House, but, in its humbler way, it is also a miraculous creation. The reader of Vicki Fairfax’s account will be struck by the serendipitous way in which the institution came into existence and achieved its present, and now seemingly inevitable, form. But that reader must grapple first with the more fundamental question of what in fact constitutes the Arts Centre. The first proposals were for a mélange of institutions to be placed upon this or another site, with the older term ‘cultural centre’ embracing both the National Gallery and the performing arts spaces. Geoffrey Serle later referred to the gallery as the first stage of ‘Roy Grounds’s Arts Centre’, after its architect. But, in current parlance, the Victorian Arts Centre excludes the National Gallery and includes only the theatres, the Concert Hall, associated galleries and restaurants, and the Performing Arts Museum. It is governed by its own Arts Centre Trust, which since 1980 has also operated the Sidney Myer Music Bowl.

It is important to get this picture clear because the book contains substantial material on the National Gallery, but is not in fact about it. From the 1940s there were sporadic proposals for the building of a cultural centre, and by 1943 the present site, which had been occupied by Wirth’s Circus, was a strong contender. But there was no consensus as to what it would contain, and nor could there be, because there was as yet no agreement as to which institutions — amongst the State Library, National Gallery and Museums — should leave the old site in Swanston Street. Still less was it clear which performing arts and performing arts bodies should be accommodated by the state in any new centre.

For these reasons, Fairfax deals, surprisingly but interestingly, with many aspects of the postwar development of the arts in Melbourne (one would like to say Victoria, but really cannot). These include the role of Sir Keith Murdoch, member and later President of the Gallery’s Board of Trustees, amongst whose visionary actions was the endowment of the Herald Chair of Fine Arts at Melbourne University. We hear a lot about the negotiations that led to the design and construction of the National Gallery, including much about Roy Grounds and his idiosyncrasies — but no analysis of its architecture, and little about its construction. We suddenly pick up the story again when it opens in 1968, and then it disappears.

So this is, strictly speaking, the prehistory and history only of what is now called the Victorian Arts Centre. It is seen largely from the viewpoint of George Fairfax (whose widow is the author, though the relationship is never made explicit), and relies too heavily upon what one might call internal sources — personal reminiscences, the Centre’s records, and the collections of the Performing Arts Museum. It is an amateur history in the best and worst senses — a history by an enthusiast for the subject, but one written in a less than professional way. The latter need not have been a great problem, had it received the professional editing it deserved.

So, to turn to Pedant’s Corner, as a recent ABR reviewer has put it: the historical research and citation are scrappy and idiosyncratic; the identification of illustrations is uneven; the acknowledgment of their sources is non-existent; and the spelling and other details are often erroneous. The reproduction of early illustrations without dates, as with Nettleton’s photograph of the site, is simply irresponsible. Apart from the internal research already mentioned, there has been some work amongst the manuscripts of the La Trobe Library (misspelled ‘Latrobe’), but not much other research. One would expect a cultural historian to make some use of Geoffrey Serle’s From the Deserts Prophets Come (1973), and, in a sense, Fairfax does so. But she has apparently never read or even seen it, for she quotes it only at second-hand from Jane Clarke’s history of the Victorian Arts Centre (which is apparently a thesis, though here cited in the form of a publication). And this is far from the only such second-hand quotation.

It is the editor, Jenny Zimmer, who must bear the blame for superfluous hyphens in words like ‘class-room’, ‘no-confidence’, ‘stock-market’, ‘neo-classical’ and ‘Desbrowe-Annear’ (for the architect H.D. Annear). As if to compensate, the hyphen is confiscated from ‘l’Oiseau-Lyre’. Roy Grounds is irritatingly given an apostrophe but no ‘s’ in the possessive, as if he were plural. Arthur Calwell is given as ‘Caldwell’, Geoffrey Mewton as ‘Merton’, Guilford Bell as ‘Gilford’, and
Robin Ramsay as ‘Ramsey’. Professor Len Stevens is at one point transmuted into Len Evans, a considerable feat in view of the disparity in their physiques.

Returning to the main story. It begins with the first circus on the site in 1877, although, in view of the engineering problems that were to ensue, it would have been more useful to start with the regular flooding of the land, and its reclamation with silt dredged from the Yarra. A line of sheet piling was installed along the Yarra in 1862 by the Municipality of Emerald Hill, running along the river bank until it approached Princes Bridge, where it angled inland to meet the built-up bridge approach. It was thus that the present site was created.

In discussing the acid water that caused such problems in building the theatre complex, Fairfax attributes its origins vaguely and inexplicably to soil conditions developed over thousands of years, and the possible role of a car-battery factory that had operated downstream is summarily dismissed. The far more likely causes — the paper factory that functioned nearby on the Yarra Bank for over a century, and the antimony smelting works of Bright Brothers (hence Bright Street) — are not mentioned at all.

There is a reference to the discovery in the building excavations of ‘a wooden stave water pipe from the 1840s which would originally have carried water downstream to ships anchored in the bay’. This is entirely spurious, for there was never any such pipeline (though one had been proposed by Hoddle, to depart from a point considerably further downstream) and the stave pipe was probably of the type patented in Australia in 1908. There is an oddly coy reference to the article ‘Grounds for Divorce’ published in Nation in 1960, and ‘attributed to one of Boyd’s friends’. Its author, as identified in Serle’s biography Robin Boyd (1995), was Neil Clerehan, abetted by Boyd himself and by Peter Ryan. We do not hear of Grounds’s quixotic quest for what he thought was brown bluestone — having been misled by the rust marks from iron masonry saws — nor of the remarkable (and mercifully unsuccessful) proposal advanced by Grounds and Eric Westbrook to bring Bunning’s Coal Exchange from London and to place it upon the Arts Centre site. We get little critical analysis of the buildings, or their sometimes kitsch decoration, but specific problems such as the acoustics of the Concert Hall are duly confronted.

The strengths of this account include the credit given to Margaret Sutherland and her Combined Arts Centre Movement in the 1940s. Indeed, the interactions of the cultural nomenclatura, arts officials, politicians and governments are generally well-covered. There are also insightful comments such as that on Grounds, who ‘had a great capacity to think up splendidly colourful explanations for his designs when he had trouble recalling his original intentions — or if the bare truth was too uninteresting’. There is much detail about significant performances, which will stir the hearts and memories of Melburnians. But best of all are the illustrations, in generous numbers and often in colour, of the personalities, performances and posters that have constituted the true life of this complicated complex.