Just how the territory of Nunavut and its government came to be is an impressive bit of history.

With stories and details gathered together for the first time, Made in Nunavut: An Experiment in Decentralized Government by Jack Hicks and Graham White provides a valuable insight into the critical evaluation and a solid historical account.

Hicks describes influential events in the book that may otherwise be forgotten, such as the May 1997 gender parity plebiscite. Had Nunavummiut voted in favour, the GN would have been the first legislated gender-equal government in the world, with voters casting ballots for one male and one female for each constituency.

However, the concept failed with a 57 per cent "no" vote.

"On the one hand that thing is completely history, it's not officially mentioned anymore. Didn't happen. It's over. But at the same time the history of it needs to be recorded because in the future it will pop up," said Hicks. "There's just a lot of fundamental history in the book that we thought needed to be captured."

Federal negotiators laughed.

Another example, among many, is how Inuit negotiators actually managed to get their own territory and government, when the federal negotiators had laughed that idea off from the outset. When it came time to sign the land claim, the Inuit side refused unless they got a Government of Nunavut. Tom Siddon, minister for the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) for then-prime minister Brian Mulroney, agreed.

But the concept of Dehcho was supposed to be the Government of the Northwest Territories. It would have been as possible because it was supposed to be the Government of the Northwest Territories. It would have been just one of many land claims in the Northwest Territories," said Hicks.

Had Inuit negotiators known a government was on the table, a possibility, they might have streamlined the land claim process and wouldn't have organized things differently.

From 1994 to early 1997, Hicks, a social research consultant, served as the director of the Nunavut Implementation Commission, which developed the basic design of the Government of Nunavut. He attended many of the meetings described in the book.

White is a retired University of Toronto Missassauga professor who closely followed "political and administrative issues surrounding the emergence of the Government of Nunavut government" throughout the 1990s and 2000s. He calls himself a "structure and process of government guy."

The two got to know each other in 1994, said White. Ominously, they've been working on the book in one way or another from various locations ever since.

"A lot of back-and-forthing," said Hicks.

Successes and failures

After consolidating their assessment of the successes and failures of decentralization, the authors, in the concluding chapter, provide a critical assessment of the GN as it is now. Hicks and White are clear in their opinion that the main flaws in the government - and they outline several - cannot be laid at the feet decentralization.

"A brief review of a few of the GN's more egregious policy and administrative failures, in programs and services for children, youth and family; construction of social housing; and suicide and family violence prevention strategies demonstrates that decentralization bears little responsibility for them," write Hicks and White.

Inaction and failure to implement appear as the culprits.

"I think the big failure of the government after 15 years is the lack of capacity to address the fundamental social realities and the anger from the past," said Hicks. "But, on the other hand, maybe we just saw the first step."

Hicks is referring to the inquest into the high rate of suicide in the territory held in September and the recent appointment of an associate deputy minister on quality of life who is taking the lead in co-ordinating suicide prevention efforts.

Made in Nunavut is dedicated to Laura Ulittak Gauthier and in the minds of both authors, Gauthier, who died unexpectedly of a brain aneurysm in her sleep at the age of 30, is an example of a "confident, competent and diplomatically young Inuk."

"She, very quickly before the creation of Nunavut, she very quickly became, when there was all that interagency work between (the implementation commission), the GNWT, NTI and Canada, there was something about her personality that made her an absolutely key, pivotal person in all those relationships," said Hicks.

The authors quote Judy Tanigu, who headed the Nunavut Secretariat for DIAND: "Few people involved in the project realized just how critical she was in making it (Nunavut) a success."

"As for the future, as White says, 'Nunavut is still a place where one person can make a big difference.'"