

Triple Portrait of John A. Olthuis: Fifty Years of Change on the Land

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The first portrait introduced the man and his thinking. A portrait, though, is judged by what a life produced. This second piece turns to results. It follows John Olthuis into the struggles themselves, where he and the nations he served pushed Canada to change course on the land (Olthuis, 2025).

The story starts in the North, with the pipeline that opened the first portrait. In the 1970s, the Dene stood against that giant project, and Olthuis joined their cause. A public inquiry studied the plan and called for a long pause so that land claims could be settled first, and the original pipeline did not go ahead (Olthuis, 2025). The Dene won years of breathing room. Olthuis is candid that the gain did not fully hold, since Canada later approved a different pipeline (Olthuis, 2025). Even so, the early lesson was clear. When the land is at risk, delay itself can be a kind of victory.

Move east to Grassy Narrows. A paper mill had poured mercury into the river that fed the community. People were poisoned. The fish were poisoned. A way of life was poisoned. Olthuis worked with the people of Grassy Narrows and nearby Whitedog to seek some measure of justice. The communities won a settlement, payment for the harm, and a special board to handle mercury disability claims for years afterward (Olthuis, 2025). The damage could not be undone. However, a company and a government were made to answer for it.

The next fight was in northern Ontario, in the old-growth forest of the Teme-Augama Anishnabai. Loggers were cutting trees that had stood for centuries. To Olthuis, this showed a settler habit, since the trees were treated as nothing more than a commodity to be sold (Olthuis, 2025). The people blocked the logging road. Many were arrested, including their chief, Gary Potts.

Here, Olthuis did something inventive. He reached for an old idea in Canadian law called colour of right. In plain terms, if a person honestly believes the land is theirs and acts to protect it, that belief can stand as a defence in court (Olthuis, 2025). A judge agreed. Chief Potts was acquitted on that ground. The forest was not fully saved, and the larger land case was later lost at the

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Supreme Court. However, a Canadian court had accepted that the Teme-Augama honestly believed the land was their own.

That case fed a wider argument. Olthuis says governments do their damage one permit at a time. He describes a slow harm by a thousand small permits, no single one of which looks fatal on its own (Olthuis, 2025). Together, they erase a forest and a way of life.

Travel north again, to Labrador, and the Innu. For years, fighter jets from several countries practised low flying over Innu land. The noise terrified children and scattered the caribou. Olthuis writes that the constant flights felt like a violent airshow staged above people's homes (Olthuis, 2025). An earlier blow had come when a hydro dam flooded Innu land and drowned the animals, a loss he calls not only an environmental wound but a spiritual one (Olthuis, 2025). On top of all this, Canada wanted a full military base there.

The Innu refused to accept any of it. They camped at the end of the runways. They were arrested. Olthuis defended them, again using the colour of right idea, and a judge acquitted four of their leaders. The Innu also carried their case across Europe, straight to the governments whose jets were flying (Olthuis, 2025). The result was striking. The base plan was dropped, and the flights shrank over the years (Olthuis, 2025). A small nation, with a lawyer and a moral case, helped turn back a military plan backed by powerful states.

The same nation then faced an enormous nickel mine at Voisey's Bay. The company behaved at first as if the Innu were not there. The Innu protested, went to court, and then sat down to bargain. What they won changed the rules. The company accepted that the mine could not proceed without their agreement, and the deal they signed gave them a real say and a share of the wealth (Olthuis, 2025). Industry and government were finally pushed to treat Innu consent as required, not optional (Olthuis, 2025).

Step back and the pattern is plain. Olthuis did not win by being the loudest. He won by being patient and inventive. He used court orders to slow the bulldozers. He used delay to protect the land. He used careful legal argument to give Indigenous claims real weight (Olthuis, 2025).

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This is the method that set him apart from many advocates. He did not only name the wrong. He showed, case by case, how to make it stop. He worked inside the system and pressed it to honour its own promises.

He is also honest about the cost. He never pretends these wins were clean. People went to jail. Families suffered. Some forests still fell. Some cases were lost. The victories came slowly, and the price was paid mostly by Indigenous people (Olthuis, 2025). He turns away the credit, saying the courage came from the communities while he held the legal pen (Olthuis, 2025).

One thread ties every case together. In each one, the real question was who decides. The choice over whether a pipeline is built, a river is used, a forest is cut, or a mine is dug had long rested with Ottawa or the province. Olthuis spent five decades pushing that power, even a little, back toward the people of the land (Olthuis, 2025).

This portrait has watched him win on the ground, river by river and tree by tree. However, Olthuis was always after something larger than any single case. He wanted the rules of the country itself to change.

The other two parts in this triple portrait are: Triple Portrait of John A. Olthuis: The Settler Lawyer Who Was Told to Dismantle and Triple Portrait of John A. Olthuis: The Bigger Fight and the Road Ahead.

Reference

Olthuis, J. A. (2025). *On dismantling settler colonialism: An insider's perspective on reconciliation with Indigenous peoples*. University of Toronto Press.