

Kyffin Williams (1918 - 2006)

Hill Farmer (Wil Ifan)
Brush and grey ink and grey wash.

Signed with initials KW. at the lower right.

Numbered 8 on the verso.

420 x 297 mm. (16 1/2 x 11 3/4 in.)

Drawn in 1991, this large sheet depicts a Welsh hill farmer named, if perhaps apocryphally, Wil Ifan (or William Evans). (As the artist has noted, he often gave these figures names that were not their own: 'All the hill-farmers I put into my pictures, I name John Jones for sometimes I know who they are & sometimes I don't…to me he is always John Jones whether he be fat or thin, dark or fair, old or young: he is always the man who lived amongst the rocks and valleys of Wales for centuries. He is part of our landscape but I wonder often how much longer he will be there.')

Kyffin Williams cared deeply for the rugged hill farmers of the Welsh mountains, and they appear in his paintings and drawings throughout his career. As his biographer Rian Evans has noted, 'Perhaps nothing defines Kyffin Williams as well as his drawings of old Welsh farmers and shepherds…Having grown up walking the mountains with them, it was to these men that the artist owed his intimate knowledge of the landscape and his profound love of it. His portrayals honour their integrity and tenacity, they show his respect.' Williams himself has written of these hill farmers: 'They come in all shapes and sizes; tall, short, lean or rotund, dark or fair, broad or narrow of face. They may be Ordovician or Silurian

celts but whatever their distant origins they are the same in their determination to make a living in a harsh environment. But farming, especially hill-farming, is changing so that one day the sheep will go to be replaced by the scrub oak. The farmer will disappear & the landscape will change forever.'

The hill farmer in the present sheet is here studied in isolation, divorced from the rugged Welsh landscape in which he so often appears in Williams's paintings. The artist has noted that 'The hazel stick is so much a part of the farmer in North Wales. The handle is of the same piece as the shaft and when used it points forward with the thump along it so that the full weight of the arm is pressed into the ground. Farmers lean on it, use it for balance when crossing a steep hillside and also for sorting out sheep. It is an invaluable piece of equipment.' As a draughtsman, Williams was fond of using a brush loaded with ink: 'One method I use is to sharpen the wrong end of a brush to a wedge shape so that I have one broad side and one pointed side, and I dip the brush in ink rather like a reed pen. This has the advantage of producing a line which can be very thick or very fine or very faint, because you can ease off the ink on the end of the brush and you can vary your tones, your linear tones as well as your mass tone…Sometimes when I'm out drawing and it's below freezing the actual putting on of the water colour or Indian ink produces a very nice mottled effect.'

Provenance:

Thackeray Gallery, London
Purchased from them in May 2006 by Simon Barnes
Private collection, until 2008.

Artist description:

John Kyffin Williams spent a lifetime painting and drawing the landscape and people of North Wales. He entered the Slade School of Art in London in 1941, having served for five years in the Royal Welch Fusiliers before being discharged on the grounds of epilepsy. (The army doctor is said to have told him, "As you are, in fact, abnormal, I think it would be a good idea if you took up art.") Williams won the Slade's portrait prize in 1944, and in 1948 had his first one-man exhibition at Colnaghi's in London. He enjoyed a successful career, working in a distinctive style, with further exhibitions as Colnaghi's and the Leicester Galleries, and later at the Thackeray Gallery in London and various galleries in Wales.

Williams's views of the landscape of Snowdonia, painted with thick slabs of oil paint applied with a palette knife, earned him a considerable reputation. Between 1944 and 1973 he taught art at the Highgate School in London, where among his pupils was Patrick Procktor, but would return to Wales as often as possible to paint. In 1968 he received a fellowship to study the Welsh community in Patagonia, spending six months there, and within a few years had left London to settle permanently in Anglesey. Twice nominated president of the Royal Cambrian Academy, he did much to further the arts in Wales. Although best known for his dark Welsh mountain landscapes, Williams was also a gifted portrait painter. He wwas admitted to the Royal Academy in 1974, and was given a retrospective exhibition at the National Museum of Wales in 1987. Knighted in 1998, Williams died in 2006, at the age of eighty-eight.