It may seem surprising that the editors of the Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies have chosen to entrust reviewing Richard Oram’s recent volume in *The New Edinburgh History of Scotland* to a Scandinavian medievalist lacking any particular expertise in Scottish history. The reason for their decision is probably to be found in the sixth chapter of the book, “Power”, where Oram is drawing heavily on the structures of early Icelandic society for inspiration in his tentative to imagine the power structures of the Scottish mainland before and during this “long twelfth century” when the kings of Alba gradually gained control of, or at least some degree of recognition in, all of its component territories.

Despite the book’s title, it is the extinction in 1234 of the direct male line of the lords of Galloway that brings Oram’s account of political events to a close, since it removed the last competing dynasty on the mainland that had some traditional claim to independent royalty. The point of departure in 1070 is the date of the marriage of King Malcolm III to Margaret, sister and heir to the last male member of England’s old Wessex dynasty, an event that has usually been seen as the opening up of the royal dynasty of Alba to massive political and cultural influence from the continent. Within this chronological framework, however, Oram
endeavours to deploy a new interpretation of the history of the period, reconsidering and often challenging many old certainties and consensus opinions in the process.

The chapter on “Power” (pp. 197-232) is the pivotal part of Oram’s reinterpretation of the history of Scotland from 1070 to 1234; it links the first part of the book, “Narratives” (pp. 13-194), to the second part, “Processes” (pp. 197-360), of which it forms the first chapter. “Narratives” is the political history of the period, and Oram’s re-evaluation of many elements in that history is deeply informed by the view of the power structures of early Scottish society that he develops more fully in the chapter on Power. In this chapter, while recognising the importance of Geoffrey Barrow’s work on the changes affecting Scottish society in the twelfth century, Oram is also highly critical of the model of ‘feudalisation’ which Barrow proposed. One of the major sources of inspiration for Oram’s criticism is Susan Reynolds’ full-scale attack on the construct of ‘feudalism’ in her book on *Fiefs and Vassals* (1994) and a subsequent article (2003) on the same question as it applies specifically to Scotland. However, the inspiration from Reynolds is not limited to questioning the notion of a comprehensive and systematic imposition from above of an imported, ‘ready-made’ feudal ‘system’ upon Scottish society. Oram has taken to heart the wider implications of Reynolds’ criticism. A major point in her work is that the construct of ‘feudalism’ originates with historians who have used the systematised, sanitised and rationalised descriptions of feudal law that were developed in the late Middle Ages and Early Modern times in order to make sense of the fragmentary and more or less chaotic evidence from the twelfth century and earlier. In doing so, historians have impose a later ‘system’ upon societies where no such system existed.
Oram has evidently realised that this is a way of approaching the sources for the history of the earlier medieval centuries that is not specific to the question of ‘feudalism’. It is actually a general problem in all early medieval history, and Oram is equally critical of attempts to reconstruct ancient Scottish Gaelic society from a combination of medieval Irish records and early modern Lowland Scottish legal treatises, even when he himself is endeavouring to wring some usable information out of such sources. This scepticism is also extended to the notion of monarchical rule. Oram dismisses the idea that in uniting mainland Scotland under their sway, the kings of Alba were stepping into the shoes of earlier rulers of less extensive territories. While this may have been true in the case of some reasonably well-attested kingdoms such as Strathclyde and Moray, Oram makes the important point that it would be unwise to extend this model to other regions where evidence of earlier royalty is lacking, notably most of the Highlands. When asking how we are to understand ‘pre-feudal Scottish society – or, as he elegantly terms it, using a hint from Geoffrey Barrow, ‘the regime that has no name’ – Oram is actually opening a Pandora’s box of various possibilities. There is no necessary reason to assume that eleventh-century Scotland had just one kind of regime of power; various forms of lordship may have co-existed with more or less autonomous peasant societies.

The main problem with early autonomous peasant societies is that the culture of record-keeping was closely bound up with monarchical and ecclesiastical structures that in northern European autonomous peasant societies were either absent or fairly weak. Hence these societies have mostly left very few written records, and indeed Scotland’s Highlands are still largely shrouded in the mists of prehistory for most of the period under review. Oram’s solution for penetrating those mists is to adopt a comparative approach and look at the most
vividly documented autonomous peasant society of medieval northern Europe: free state Iceland.

This is a sensible bid, especially since archaeological and place-name evidence indicates a substantial amount of Scandinavian influence and settlement during the Viking Age on the coastal fringes of the Highlands. In particular, the occurrence of the place-name Dingwall in Ross suggests the existence of power structures analogous to early Norway and Iceland, since it is derived from Old Norse Þingvellir, the term for the assembly-place of a region or district of some size; curiously, Oram does not mention this fact. Nevertheless, there is a *caveat lector*: the Icelandic family sagas with their dramatic storylines and dialogues famous for their tough one-liners must be understood as historical novels. They were written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, undoubtedly from traditions reaching back to the late tenth and early eleventh centuries that they purport to describe, but exactly how much of the narratives should be ascribed to authorial invention remains largely unverifiable. The strongest argument for the veracity of the general picture of early Icelandic society which the family sagas provide is the systematic differences between that picture and Icelandic society in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as it is depicted in the less famous so-called contemporary sagas. These differences show that the authors of the sagas were conscious that ancient Icelandic society was different from their own; yet that may still have allowed the authors considerable freedom of imagination and invention. Despite such methodological caveats, Oram’s approach is defensible, since his focus is on the general picture of the workings of early Icelandic power structures rather than on details of individual behaviour.

Although early Icelandic society was very far from being egalitarian in socio-economic terms, it did not have an institutionally defined, hereditary nobility. Oram points to this fact in
In order to suggest that the same might have been the case in large parts of eleventh-century Scotland. In keeping with this suggestion, his chapter on “Nobles” (pp. 295-327) is not the traditional story of the transformation of an old, largely Gaelic nobility by the influx of foreign knights and feudal institutions, but a tale of the formation of a new hereditary nobility. In this process, both native elites and immigrant knights took part, and the driving force was the transformation of the Scottish monarchy from a loose, tribute-based overlordship to a more exacting administrative kingship. There is much to commend in this hypothesis, since it brings Scotland’s development in the long twelfth century in line with what was happening in most European monarchies and principalities at the same time (and it should be noted that Oram also draws inspiration for this interpretation from the work of Piotr Górecki and others on Piast Poland).

Nevertheless, it seems to this reviewer that there is a problem with Oram’s chapter on “Nobles”. He never really defines the term ‘noble’ any more precisely than as a hereditary status associated with the adoption of chivalric culture. It is hardly doubtful that this chivalric culture created a new cultural barrier between ‘nobles’ and ‘commoners’, but as for the novelty of a hereditary nobility, Oram seems to be stretching his Icelandic analogy too far. Early Iceland may not have had an institutionally defined, hereditary nobility, and some upward social mobility was possible; yet the six families who ultimately, in the thirteenth century, were vying for power in Iceland were all the descendants of the men we read about in the sagas of Iceland’s heroic age. Elite status certainly was inherited.

Another instructive Scandinavian parallel is provided by Denmark. The Danish provincial law-books of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries do not contain the slightest hint at the existence of a hereditary nobility; yet charters, chronicles and other sources reflect a
society that was dominated by a wealthy aristocracy, and in some cases the genealogies of these men can be reconstructed over several generations. Writing around 1200, the great Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus was explicit about this. After a hard-won victory over a force of Estonian pirates in the Swedish island of Öland in 1169, Saxo describes how the Danes disposed of their numerous casualties: the non-noble (*ignobiles*) were buried on the battlefield, but the corpses of the nobles (*nobiles*) were salted and brought back to Denmark (Saxo, bk 14, ch. 40, § 11). This example is rather characteristic of Saxo’s aristocratic view of Danish society. Even though there is no formal evidence of a hereditary nobility in Denmark before the late thirteenth century, there is no doubt that such a nobility existed in the twelfth century, and that it was well-known who belonged to it; and there is no reason to suppose that this social category was a novelty. This parallel might give food for thought in Oram’s twelfth-century Scottish context: the absence of evidence for an institutionally defined, hereditary nobility does not imply that no hereditary nobility existed. Where the Danish and the Scottish cases converge is in the fact that at the latest by the mid-thirteenth century, noble (or privileged) status was indissolubly bound up with royal service.

Space does not permit further development of the numerous interesting parallels and contrasts between Scotland and Denmark in the long twelfth century under review here: the complicated relationship to a much more powerful immediate neighbour to the south (England with respectively Germany), the desire to break loose of ecclesiastical dependence on the southern neighbour (achieved in Denmark by the creation of a Danish archiepiscopal see in 1103-04, but only slowly and imperfectly in Scotland), the adoption of chivalric culture in both kingdoms (but without fiefs and vassals in Denmark), the creation of royal boroughs, changes in the forms of dependence for the peasantry. The overall conclusion of such a comparison would most likely be that Scotland was considerably more dependent on England
than Denmark was on Germany, and it seems likely that geopolitical factors played a large role in shaping this contrast: despite its periodical dependence upon Germany, Denmark was at the same time the most powerful kingdom in Scandinavia; Scotland lacked such alternative outlets.

Oram’s book is a courageous attempt to create a new narrative of Scotland’s history from the late eleventh to the early thirteenth century. It is bound to stir up controversy on many points, but it is evident that it has not been the author’s goal to write anything like a ‘definitive’ history. On the contrary, he repeatedly points to the need for further research. His wise choice of seeking inspiration from other countries in northern Europe could and should urge Scottish historians to continue along that path and include other countries in the comparison. Denmark is just one possible example.