He used to boast that his grandfather was a Scottish crofter, which was being somewhat economical with the truth. The last crofter in his family had been his great-grandfather, as he well knew. Grandfather Daniel Macmillan had come south to become a booksellers’ apprentice in Cambridge, where – with his brother – he founded what was to become
the great Macmillan publishing empire. By the time that Harold Macmillan was born, in 1894, the family, already immensely wealthy, had long been established in one of the most fashionable quarters of London, and any Scottish connections were but a distant memory.

His father, Maurice, was Daniel's second son, a cultured, diffident man, who was totally in thrall to his American wife Nellie, a talented musician, but a bit of a harridan, with no inhibitions in expressing her strong views and prejudices, which included a large dose of Mid-Western Protestantism. Macmillan was the youngest of three brothers, but was soon selected by his ambitious mother as the one most likely to make his mark in the world, and she lost no opportunity to push him forward. In later life, Harold was to write: 'I can truthfully say that I owe everything all through my life to my mother's devotion and support.' As Prime Minister, he was to tell a friend: 'I admired her but never really liked her ... she dominated me and she still dominates me.'

A solitary and withdrawn child, who got more affection from his nanny than his parents, he was unhappy at Eton, from where he was removed at the age of 15 on the grounds of ill health. This was probably the actual reason, though his official biographer, Alistair Horne, refers coyly to 'inevitable rumours' that he left for the 'usual reasons' for boys to be expelled from public schools. He was highly inhibited and, according to Lord Blake, who knew him well, found it hard in later life 'to relate at all easily to his contemporaries, to his children and to women' (Blake 1996, p.276). After Eton, he was educated at home by tutors, with one of whom – Ronnie Knox – he was to to form a close and affectionate relationship. Knox, who much later was to gain renown as a leading Roman Catholic theologian, was then a young Anglo-Catholic priest, who had been at Oxford with Harold's eldest brother, Daniel. Still trembling on the brink of conversion to Rome, he was to be unceremoniously ejected from the household by a furious Nellie Macmillan, who had no intention of seeing her son being corrupted by Popish doctrines, and who also feared the growing attraction between her 17-year-old son and his 22-year-old tutor.

Despite the loss of his formidable tutor, Macmillan was able to win an Exhibition to Balliol College, Oxford, where he spent a gloriously happy two years between 1912 and 1914, gaining First Class Honours in the first part of his Classics degree, which he was never to complete. At Oxford he renewed his friendship with Knox, who was now a chaplain at Trinity College, and – together with another close friend – strongly urged him to take the final plunge and convert to Rome. To Knox's consternation, however, Macmillan himself – fearful of his mother's