Austere describes the upbringing of Kenneth Boulding. In his words, where he grew up would probably be considered a slum by current standards. His parents were both from working-class families. He never shied away from this characterization. He embraced his family’s working-class roots and was always sympathetic to the struggles of that class. His childhood home at Four Seymour Street was in the middle of Liverpool, England, which, in the early twentieth century, was working-class cosmopolitan. This was endearing in many ways to Boulding. His neighborhood had Jews, Belgians, Irish, and a black family. He believed that this exposure to diversity trained him well for the American melting pot he would enter early in his professional life. There was no doubt why he felt at home in America. It both suited his personality and reminded him of home. Before delving into the specifics on Boulding’s life, it is necessary to better understand his family background—to dig into the roots of his family tree and see what genetic commingling led to his life.

Bouldings and Rowes

Boulding’s mother, Elizabeth “Bessie” Ann Boulding (1880–1961), was one of three daughters born to George and Mary Rowe. George was a blacksmith and a Methodist lay preacher. Bessie grew up in the little town of Chard in Somerset, England. Her parents were poor by most measures, but growing up in the rural agricultural community gave her family members a sense of freedom. George was one of ten children raised in Devon by farmers who died soon after his birth. He worked as a miner for several years before apprenticing as a blacksmith. Mary’s family was better off. Her father was a trained, but unlicensed, practicing veterinarian. He was also a tippler, which did little to improve the family’s financial situation. His name was George Austen, which led to a family legend that they were related to Jane Austen—though the evidence makes this appear unlikely (Kerman, 1974).
At 14, Bessie left school and apprenticed for three years with a dressmaker. She was usually too busy reading to accomplish much sewing. Bessie was a lifelong bibliophile and poet. While it is difficult to discern precisely from where Kenneth Boulding inherited his literary interests, his mother was certainly a significant influence. Since dressmaking failed to capture Bessie, there was a great struggle with her family until they decided to send her to live with an aunt in London. While there, she worked for a family, raising their children. She learned French with one of the daughters and attended Methodist church services.

It was at this time that William Boulding was sent on a plumbing call to the family's house where Bessie was working. They met and had a bond. She recruited him to play organ at her church. He was a Methodist recently baptized. But he was resolute in his religious beliefs. He became a lay preacher and Sunday school teacher (similar to his stepfather). But because Bessie was 18 at the time (Will was 22), and Will did not have much money, her family would not support their marriage. Their courtship lasted four years before they finally got married in May 1902. In Bessie's autobiography (1984a), she recalls that she wore a brown dress on her wedding day and that her sister, who wore a cream-colored silk dress, looked more like a bride than she did. Because of this memory, she wrote to her son when he got engaged to Elise (his future wife) that she should wear a light-colored dress on their wedding day. Judging by the wedding photo at the University of Michigan Archives, Elise did, in fact, wear a light-colored dress for their wedding (probably her own decision).

Boulding’s father, William Couchman Boulding, grew up in Liverpool. There is little information on Will's family. Kenneth Boulding himself did not know much (as evidenced from interview transcripts) of his father's family. His father did not talk much about his family—for good reason. What is known is that Will’s parents were married only a few weeks before his birth. His mother was 30 and his father 36 when he was born. When Will was one-and-a-half years old his father died of a kidney infection. His mother remarried an irascible, abusive drunkard and philanderer (he at one point had two wives) who served as Will’s male household role model until his mother died of a stroke when he was 12. Shortly after this time, his stepfather threw him out of the house; so Will had to leave school and start making a living. The headmaster at his school wanted him to try for a scholarship, but his stepfather would not let him. In truth, Will wanted to be a minister, but it never happened. In typical fashion of the period and place, he adopted his father's (and stepfather's and stepuncle's) trade as a gas fitter. When gas lighting