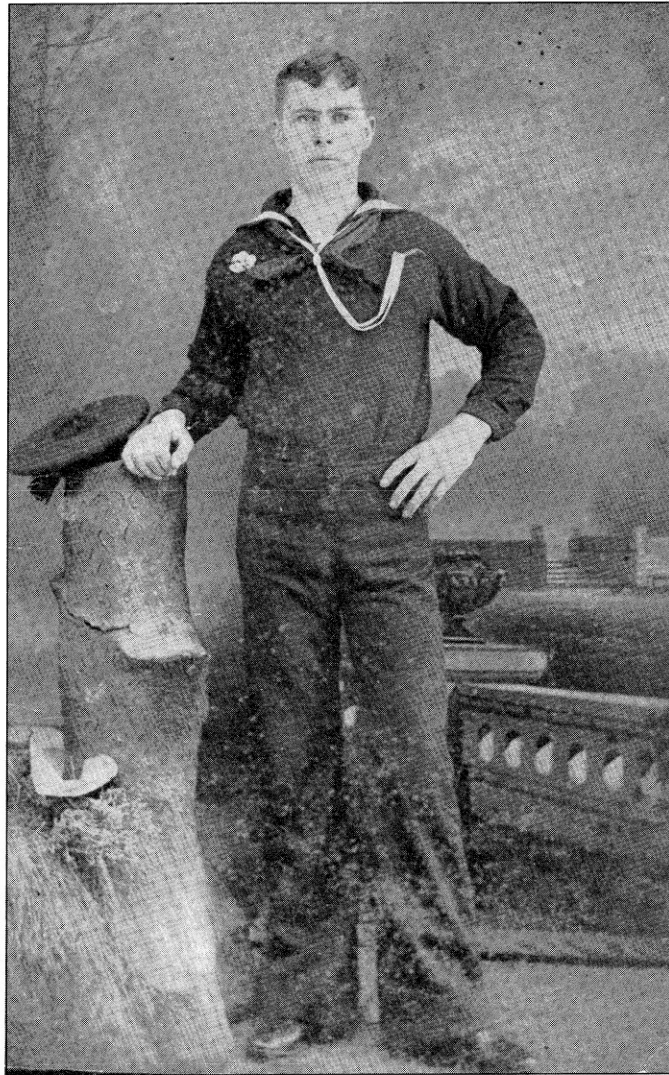


*"I WAS IN THE STREET TALKING WITH A FRIEND AND WE WENT INTO A BAR ROOM. . . . THE PEOPLE IN THE BAR TOLD ME THERE WAS A CROWD OUTSIDE WAITING FOR ME AND NOT TO GO OUT, SO I WAITED AWHILE UNTIL I THOUGHT THE MOB HAD GONE AWAY. THEN I WENT OUT AND AS SOON AS I WAS OUTSIDE WAS STRUCK ON THE HEAD WITH A STONE. I TURNED AROUND AND TRIED TO GET BACK INTO THE SALOON, BUT THEY WOULDN'T LET ME IN. THE MOB WAS AROUND ME ON ALL SIDES."*

*WILLIAM TURNBULL,  
UNITED STATES NAVY*



*"WE SAW TURNBULL BEING PURSUED BY SOME FIFTEEN OR TWENTY CHILEANS. . . . THE CROWD WAS HITTING HIM WITH CLUBS AND ROCKS, WHILE OTHERS SHOVED AND KNOCKED HIM DOWN. HE WAS A SIGHT TO BEHOLD, ALL COVERED WITH BLOOD FROM HEAD TO FOOT. HE WAS RUNNING AWAY, FLEEING FOR HIS LIFE, TRYING TO GET AWAY. . . . THE LADY WITH ME AT THE WINDOW FAINTED AWAY. . . . IT WAS THE CRUELEST THING I EVER SAW, BUT WE COULD NOT DO ANYTHING."*

*WILLIAM JENKINS,  
EYEWITNESS*

# William Turnbull and the Brink of War

**By Allan J. MacRae**

**O**n a fall evening in October 1891, William Duncan Turnbull, late of Charlottetown, was savagely attacked by an angry mob in the Chilean port of Valparaiso. The incident brought the United States and Chile to the brink of war.

## The Native Son

Prince Edward Island has long been noted for exporting brains and brawn to the United States; however, it is a rare occasion when an Islander emigrates South, precipitates an international incident, and becomes an American hero. Yet that is precisely what happened to William Duncan Turnbull.

Like many young men of his genera-

tion, William Turnbull sought employment and adventure; unfortunately, he found both. Born into a seafaring family at Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, on 14 October 1867, William was the seventh child and one of four sons born to Captain Robert Turnbull, Sr., and Mary Duncan. Few records have survived to tell us how young Turnbull spent his boyhood. From an article that appeared in the *Summerside Agriculturalist* in 1892, we know that he took a great interest in sports "and was organizer of the Charlottetown Boating Club. As well, he was quite a draughtsman, and designed the Boating Club's colors: a square knot on a blue ground." He was given a strict Methodist upbringing, and it is believed he received a rudimentary education in

the local Protestant school. "He was a tall, well built, good looking fellow, standing six feet or over, and was quiet, inoffensive and popular with his companions."

William's father, Captain Robert Turnbull, Sr., was an accomplished master mariner. He was born in County Durham, England, on 29 March 1803, and emigrated to Prince Edward Island sometime in the early 1820s. A young adventurer *par excellence*, he met, courted, and won another Yorkshire native, Isabella Severy (nee Gray), the 43-year-old widow of John Severy of Crapaud. They married on 5 August 1826, and overnight Captain Turnbull became a landowner of minor means. On 24 March 1827, a daughter, Hannah Gray, was born. Appointed Constable

◀ *William Duncan Turnbull, United States Navy. The photograph was taken in Brooklyn, New York.*

for Crapaud in 1830, Turnbull soon added a further 150 acres to his farm. By the late 1840s, he owned and operated the sailing vessel, *Hannah Gray*, and had established a successful trading business between Charlottetown and various ports in New England.

Isabella Severy Turnbull died on 11 January 1856, and was buried at Tryon. The mourning period for Captain Turnbull was brief. Four months later, on 27 May, he took as his second wife Mary Duncan, a native of Charlottetown. They married at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, but they made their home at Charlottetown, where the Captain kept his schooner. From this second marriage was born William Duncan Turnbull in 1867.

Naturally, it was thought that young Turnbull would follow in his father's footsteps and go to sea. Accordingly, he made his way to Boston in the summer of 1889. There, on 18 September 1889, the 22-year-old Islander enlisted in the United States Navy as a foreign national. He became a coal-heaver aboard a recently commissioned American warship, the USS *Baltimore*.

The USS *Baltimore* was a first-class man-of-war in the American Navy. Considered one of the best-equipped ships of her day, the *Baltimore* was in the vanguard of United States military presence. In the spring of 1891, the State Department ordered her to Chile. She arrived off the port of Valparaiso on 7 April 1891 in the midst of a full-blown revolution.

## Revolution in Chile

The revolution in Chile began as a political dispute between the executive and legislative branches of government over the exercise of power as granted in their constitution. The dispute eventually led to open rebellion, with the Congressional forces taking up arms against the legally elected government of President Jose Manuel Balmaceda. Although the conflict was clearly an internal affair, the United States soon became embroiled.

When the USS *Baltimore* was ordered to Chile in the spring of 1891, its ostensible purpose was to protect American property and to provide safe passage for American nationals onshore. In reality, the *Baltimore* was on a secret mission. The besieged Balmaceda government had asked the Americans to intercept and seize the merchant ship *Itata*, which carried a shipment of arms and ammunition for the Congressional forces. No consideration was given to the fact that the American Navy had no legal right to seize the *Itata*, a Chilean vessel, as the United States had declared its neutrality and Chile was not an enemy. Nevertheless, the *Itata* and its much-needed cargo of munitions was seized by the *Baltimore* and dispatched for safe-keeping to San Diego, California.

As might be expected, the loss of the ship and its cargo was a bitter blow to the insurgents, and caused much hard feeling towards the United States government for so transparently siding with the Balmacedists. But the "*Itata* Incident" turned out to be merely the opening gun in a salvo that would raise Congressional hostility towards the United States to a fever pitch.

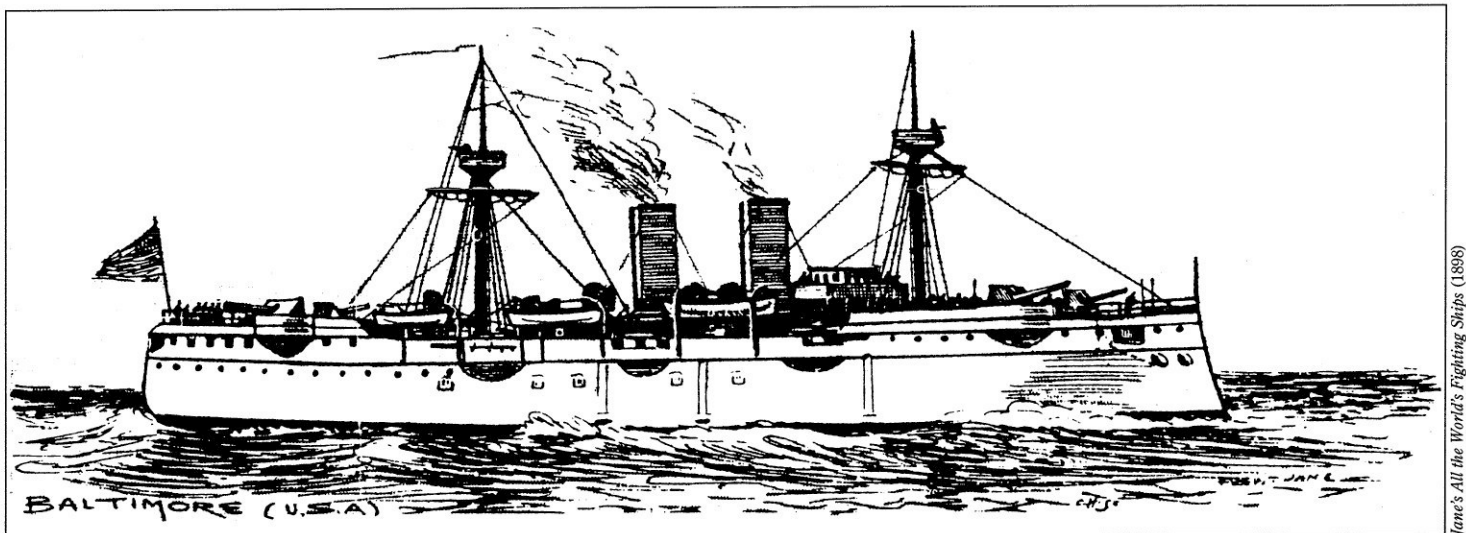
## Provocations

The seizure of the *Itata* was quickly followed by a series of other "incidents." When Congressional forces seized the northern half of Chile, preventing overland contact between Balmaceda's government and the outside world, the United States Navy agreed to move the country's submarine telegraph link with Peru (the cable happened to be owned by American interests) outside Chile's territorial waters, putting it out of reach of the rebels. Then, on 20 August, American naval forces openly "spied" on a Congressional landing at Quinteros Bay, a few miles north of Valparaiso. The rebels pressed on towards the capital of Santiago, executing any prominent Balmacedist supporters that fell into their hands. A week later, as the Balmaceda government collapsed, the United States legation in Santiago granted asylum to 80 Balmacedists, including seven ministers of the old government.

Other foreign legations also provided sanctuary to supporters of the defeated government, but the Congressionals condemned only the United States (and Argentina, which sheltered Balmaceda himself) for giving asylum. The American government's repeated "interference" and its ill-disguised support for Balmaceda had enraged Congressional supporters, even in the hour of their victory.

## The Baltimore Affair

By mid-September, life around Valparaiso appeared to have quieted, and order had been more or less restored.



Commissioned in 1888, the *Baltimore* was part of America's "Great White Fleet." She was 328 feet long with a sea speed of 18 knots.

[illegible]

The men were in the uniform of the United States Navy. They landed, exchanged some money, then walked into the section of the city where the cafes, saloons, and shops were located. Trouble was already waiting there. Turnbull's shipmate, John Hamilton, would later testify that the broker warned the Americans "they had better keep indoors, as the mob of Chile were out to get them." The "mob" consisted of "all the riff-raff of Chile: discharged soldiers and sailors, and cut-throats and everyone who harbored terrible ill-feeling against Yankees." According to another American sailor, William Sullivan, a saloon-keeper's wife told them "to be very careful of these people that they had it in for us."

wounded; the others received minor wounds—except William Turnbull.

Thinking the coast was clear, Turnbull stepped out of a Valparaiso bar and into a nightmare. Surrounded by an angry, stone-throwing crowd, he tried to get back into the saloon. They would not let him in. Turnbull took to his heels in a desperate attempt to escape the fury of the mob. One of his attackers, Carlos Gomez, caught up with Turnbull and stabbed him.

Gomez fled as Turnbull fell to the cobble-stoned street. Blood streaming from his wound, he got up and tried to run again, but was again overtaken by Gomez, who stabbed him repeatedly in the back. The mob closed in. Turnbull was brutally beaten, battered with sticks and clubs and stones. In all, he was stabbed 18 times with dirks and bayonets, two of the stab wounds entering the lung. Finally, the mob moved on, leaving its victim for dead.

## The Brink of War

It was now America's turn to be outraged. The day following the attack, on 17 October, Captain Schley of the *Baltimore* telegraphed news of the attack on his men to the United States legation at Santiago. Indignant over the attack, he referred to it as a "brutal assault and butchery of my men . . . an indignity of such gravity I being obliged to refer it in plain terms to the honorable Secretary of the Navy."

Back in the United States, news of the attack stirred widespread outrage and indignation. On 26 October, the Washington *Evening Star* declared, "The killing of Turnbull is no light matter. It will not be well for Chile if . . . she permits the present murder to assume the appearance of an unprovoked and unredressed assault upon the [American] republic. She will not care to deal with the whole American people, aroused against her by the blood of their murdered sailor, which she has sprinkled in their faces."

The United States Navy subsequently ordered a thorough investigation of the attack at Valparaíso on the *Baltimore's* crew. The inquiry was conducted at Mare Island, California, in December 1891 and January 1892. Over 70 of the *Baltimore's*



crewmen were questioned and each gave his deposition. At the heart of the affair was the brutal murder of William Turnbull. Meanwhile, at Santiago, Chilean officials conducted their own inquiry, which would whitewash the facts of the incident.

In the wake of the “*Baltimore Affair*,” the American government lodged a formal diplomatic protest to the Chilean government. Chile failed to recognize that the attack had ever taken place and refused to accept responsibility. By 20 January 1892, diplomatic exchanges arising from the “*Baltimore Affair*” had pushed relations between Chile and the United States to a crisis; it was clear that a showdown was at hand. War between the two countries was being discussed openly among the foreign legations at Santiago, and British newspapers were taunting the United States about its threats of an imminent invasion of Chile.

When President Benjamin Harrison delivered a formal address to Congress on 25 January, he seemed determined to push the Chilean-American controversy to a final showdown. Harrison outlined the “*Baltimore Affair*” and the savage murder of William Turnbull in a passionate tone. Plainly, he expected Congress to force the issue to a point where Chile must either formally apologize and make reparations or face the prospect of war,

having just finished a bloody civil war. As historian Osgood Hardy has commented, the President’s message was regarded by the American public as “the precursor of a virtual declaration of war by the United States Congress.” Everywhere there was talk of war.

But war did not come.

Realizing that his government had committed a serious blunder in its handling of the “*Baltimore Affair*,” President Montt of Chile bowed to American pressure. On 29 January 1892, the controversy between the United States and Chile was officially ended by a formal apology from the government of Chile and a promise of reparations.

## Epilogue

The “*Baltimore Affair*” was settled by the payment of \$75,000 in gold by the government of Chile to the government of the United States. The money was to be distributed among sailors and their heirs as reparation for damages that had been caused by the riot at Valparaíso. Of this sum, Hannah Turnbull MacRae, half-sister of William Turnbull, received \$10,000. She in turn allowed \$500 each to Turnbull’s full sisters, Grace Turnbull Merrill, Annie Turnbull McCartney, and Mary Turnbull—all of Boston, as well as \$400 to Jane Turnbull of Charlottetown.

Carlos Gomez and Jose Ahumada, the two Chileans who led the fatal attack on Turnbull, were sentenced by the Judge of Crime at Valparaíso to 500 days imprisonment; 300 days of each sentence was for carrying arms without permission.

On 27 October 1891, William Duncan Turnbull was buried with full military honours in the Protestant Cemetery at Valparaíso, Chile, escorted by a party of six mounted policemen. A fine tombstone was erected by the Navy Department of the United States government. It continues to be cared for today.

Hannah Gray Turnbull, William’s half-sister, married George MacRae of Augustin Cove in 1847. In 1860, the MacRaes moved to Kildare Capes in Lot 2, where Turnbull was a frequent visitor to their home. The author is their great-great-grandson.

## Sources

The story of how a young Charlottetown sailor almost precipitated war between the United States and Chile has been

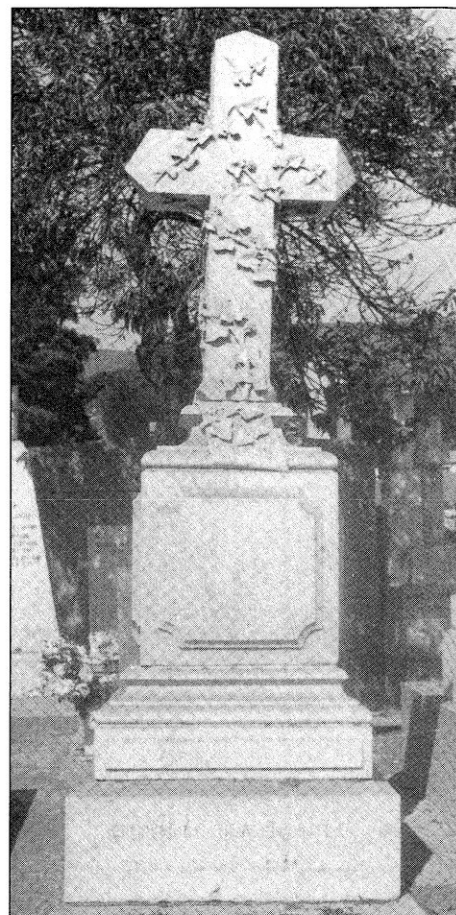


Photo by Allan MacRae

*Turnbull’s tombstone in Valparaíso was erected by his shipmates. The inscription reads “W. Turnbull/coal heaver U.S.N./born in P. E. Island/Oct. 14th 1867/died Oct. 25 1891/of wounds received/Oct. 16th 1891 in Valparaíso/aged 24 years 11 days.”*



Courtesy Allan MacRae

*Hannah Turnbull MacRae, from a picture taken when she was in her mid-80s.*

rather heavily condensed from my Ph. D. thesis, “William Duncan Turnbull and the Chilean-American Controversy, 1891-1892” (University of California, 1984). Complete references for the information repeated in this article can be found there. Generally speaking, the sources can be broken down into two divisions. Turnbull’s background and family history have been gleaned from genealogical sources in Prince Edward Island, New England, Britain. The various events of the Chilean-American controversy are re-constructed from American Department of State records, especially the Dispatches from American Ministers, 1890-1892 (Record Group 76, National Archives, Washington, D.C.) and the transcripts of the inquiry into the “*Baltimore Affair*” (*Mare Island Investigation, 1891-1892*), supplemented by newspaper reports from the United States and Chile. 🏠