

The the inscriptions  
on the tombstones,  
asked



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The spirit of this maxim is always followed in the composition of epitaphs. There is a well-known story of how someone, going through a churchyard and reading the inscriptions on the tombstones, asked in astonishment where all the bad people were buried. The reason of his question was that, while many of the epitaphs commemorated the virtues of the dead, none of them contained a single word of blame. We have, then, to consider how far this lenient treatment of the character of the dead is justifiable.

Two very good reasons can certainly be urged against speaking of the faults of the dead. In the first place it seems unjust and cowardly to accuse those who are unable to defend themselves. In the second place, speaking ill of the dead may give great pain to their living relations and friends.

The second reason only applies to the case of those who are recently dead. We are not likely to hurt any one's feelings by mentioning the faults of Alexander the Great or Napoleon. No one would maintain that historians and students of history should not do their best to form an impartial estimate of the characters of great men. Such a prohibition would deprive the world of the valuable moral lessons that history gives, when it affords us conspicuous examples of the defects that have marred the careers of eminent men.

Also the greatest virtue of the historian is truth, and truth is incompatible with the concealment of the faults of historical characters. It may be objected that it is equally contrary to truth to abstain in conversation from speaking of the faults of the recently dead. But this is not the case. The historian professes to give, in accordance with the facts of history, an impartial account of the historical characters about whom he writes; but in

ordinary conversation about private persons we do not profess to give carefully balanced estimates of character, and no one is likely to be deceived unless we ascribe to those of whom we are speaking virtues which they do not possess. Therefore, although we cannot go so far as to say that we should never speak ill of the dead, there is no reason why we should not as a general rule avoid saying anything to their discredit, particularly as in this faultfinding world there is no fear of the worst side of any one's character being forgotten after death.