A history of getting under our skin

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KIN: we decorate it, cut it, patch it up. It exposes feelings we would rather hide: we blush, turn pale. Skin can disfigure, turning its wearer into a recluse or a freak on show. Skin colours us. Knowing its susceptibilities, others punish it. People have been flayed, branded, tarred, feathered, tattooed “D” for army deserter. These distinctions turn skin into something a museum will collect when its wearer dies. Relics abound, cut from murderers and from saints.

We imbue skin with cultural significance and in Original Skin, Maryrose Cuskelly has uncovered some of this fascinating history. For the most part though her engaging book focuses on contemporary matters, in a quest to reveal how skin is salvaged, banked, transplanted and made to grow in the service of science and art. Skin, as Cuskelly writes, is no small thing. And the journey begins fittingly enough, with skin being procured. This book would be enriched by images, but not one of the horse that is shot and skinned in a knacker’s yard, its hide left lying like a discarded garment.

Fortunately, delightful snippets also abound. We are introduced to St Angela of Blannbekin, who dreams that she has feasted on Jesus’s foreskin (taste: intensely sweet). We learn how tattooing has shifted from being an indelible mark inflicted on outcasts to having the hip status it now assumes. On a quest to learn more about ageing skin, Cuskelly locates a huckster who offers pricey solutions. And she speaks with burns surgeon Fiona Wood who reveals how much more skin is than simply “a plastic bag that keeps our giblets in”.

Academic writers have turned their attention to skin, but Cuskelly’s account is aimed at a more general readership. She is wittily and critically engaged in her subject (on tattoos: “cliches abound and elegance is largely absent”). This delightful voice falters only once, in her account of two laboratory-based artists who grow skin to fashion into “victimless leather” from which they create tiny, living coats. (Never mind that foetal calves’ blood is required to succour these; nor that a larger project has the pair, as one explains, “ripping out skin from rabbits’ eyes”). In writing of these artists-in-white-coats, so to speak, Cuskelly begins to talk their language: their art is “a multilayered construction with a range of functions and meanings”, performed on terrain “rich in multifaceted narratives that strive to interrogate the use of biotechnology”.

Helen MacDonald’s new book is Possessing the Dead: The Artful Science of Anatomy.